

Application and Verification Guide

Introduction

This guide is intended for college financial aid administrators and counselors who help students begin the aid process—filing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) form, verifying information, and making corrections and other changes to the information reported on the FAFSA form.

Throughout the Federal Student Aid Handbook, we use “college,” “school,” and “institution” interchangeably unless a more specific use is given. Similarly, “student,” “applicant,” and “aid recipient” are synonyms. “Parents” in this volume refers to the parents of dependent students, and “you” refers to the primary audience of the Handbook: financial aid administrators at colleges. “We” indicates the U.S. Department of Education (the Department, ED), and “federal student aid” and “Title IV aid” are synonymous terms for the financial aid offered by the Department.

We appreciate any comments that you have on the Application and Verification Guide (AVG), as well as all the volumes of the FSA Handbook. We revise the text based on questions and feedback from the financial aid community, so please reach out to us about how to improve the Handbook through the “[Contact Customer Support](#)” feature in our [Partner Connect Help Center](#) clicking on “FSA Handbook” under the Topic section.

COVID-19 Guidance and Waivers

The Department of Education recognizes that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has created many unique challenges for postsecondary institutions. The Department has provided a variety of special guidance and regulatory flexibilities due to the President’s declaration of the COVID-19 national emergency on March 13, 2020. In addition, Congress has passed legislation offering relief from certain statutory requirements related to the Title IV, HEA programs.

In general, the COVID-19 flexibilities and waivers remain in effect until the COVID-19 national emergency is declared over. As of the date of publication of this Volume of the FSA Handbook, the COVID-19 national emergency is still in place. For more details, see the Electronic Announcement of January 15, 2021, and the websites listed below.

For COVID-19 related guidance, including waivers and exemptions of normally applicable Title IV rules, please see the following webpages:

- The Department of Education’s COVID-19 Information and Resources for Schools and School Personnel: <https://www.ed.gov/coronavirus>
- Office of Postsecondary Education COVID-19 Title IV FAQ: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/covid19faq.html>

Recent Changes

Throughout the AVG, all dates, pertinent tax return and schedule information, along with various resources and references have been updated to support the requirements associated with the 2023-2024 processing year and the 2021 base tax year. Also, where appropriate, links and publications associated with FSA’s Partner Connect and Knowledge Center have been properly updated.

We removed references to the myStudentAid mobile app throughout the AVG as it was retired on June 30, 2022, due to low usage .

Some sections were moved to better align topics and assist with narrative flow. Use the search feature to find sections that may have been relocated.

Chapter 2:

Questions regarding gender, Selective Service registration, and drug conviction were removed from the 2023-24 FAFSA form. Therefore, guidance on those questions were removed from the AVG.

The FAFSA Simplification Act (Act) includes a substantive list of documentation you MUST accept as adequate documentation that an applicant was in foster care. This list was added to Chapter 2, under “Step 3: Dependency Status”.

The Act also includes a list of documentation you MUST accept as adequate documentation that an applicant was an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or is self-supporting and at risk of being homeless. This list is also included in Chapter 2, under “Step 3: Dependency Status” and discussed further in Chapter 5 (see below).

Chapter 4:

The Act established Pell Grant eligibility for confined or incarcerated individuals enrolled in prison education programs, beginning with the 2023-24 award year. Subsequently, confined or incarcerated individuals may be selected for verification. Chapter 4 includes guidance on completing verification for this population of students, under “Applications and Information to be Verified”.

The formula for calculating untaxed portions of IRA distributions and pensions (excluding rollovers) was clarified and updated in the “Line items from the 2021 1040 tax return” table.

Chapter 5:

The FAFSA Simplification Act made significant changes to the HEA regarding special and unusual circumstances. The following is included in chapter 5:

- Guidance on the use of professional judgment to adjust the data elements used to calculate the EFC based on an applicant’s special circumstance.
- Guidance on the use of professional judgment to adjust the dependency status of an applicant based on unusual circumstances, including the ability to carry forward determinations from year-to-year.
- Expanded guidance on acceptable documentation and timing for making an unaccompanied homeless youth determination.
- Codification of the guidance regarding professional judgment during emergencies or natural disasters.

For additional information on these changes being implemented for the 2023-24 award year, see [DCL GEN-22-15](#).

We added an example regarding a student named Sam under “Unusual Circumstances” that may be considered for a dependency override.

We updated guidance on documentation required to offer Direct Unsubsidized Loans to dependent students without parental support.

Chapter 1

The Application Process: FAFSA to ISIR

The laws governing the Federal Student Aid (FSA) programs require that a person apply for aid with a form provided by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and that no fee be charged for processing it. This is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) form.

To be considered for federal student aid, a student must complete a FAFSA form. It collects financial and other information used to calculate the expected family contribution (EFC) and to determine a student's eligibility through computer matches with other agencies.

The FAFSA form is the only form students must fill out to apply for Title IV aid. A school cannot require extra information from students except for verification or resolution of conflicting information. However, a school may require additional information for other purposes, such as packaging private or institutional aid. If the school collects additional information that affects Title IV eligibility, it must take the information into account when awarding Title IV aid.

Types of Applications

Most FAFSA forms are filed electronically, but there are other options.

FAFSA online

Students, parents, and preparers can [complete an application online](#) and send it directly to the Central Processing System (CPS). They can also correct previously submitted data that was not imported from the IRS. Help is available for students online or by calling the Federal Student Aid Information Center (FSAIC) at 1-800-4-FED-AID (1-800-433-3243). To make using the Web application easier, ED produces the [FAFSA on the Web worksheet](#), which can be printed from the [StudentAid.gov](#) website.

FAA Access to CPS Online

You can submit a student's application data at [FAA Access to CPS Online](#). You can also connect to the site through [EDExpress](#).

Before submitting the data, print the signature page/FAFSA summary for the student (and parent if appropriate) to sign, or have the student fill out and sign a paper FAFSA form. As noted at the end of *Chapter 2*, you will need to retain either the signed signature page/summary or signed FAFSA form for your records, even if the student doesn't receive aid or attend your school.

Paper (PDF) FAFSA Form

More than 99% of applications are filed electronically, so the only paper option is the PDF FAFSA form, which students can get at [studentaid.gov](#). They can print the PDF and fill it out by hand, or they can type their data on the PDF before printing and mailing it. If needed, they can request single copies from FSAIC by calling 1-800-433-3243.

Other than these limited paper FAFSA form options, FSA no longer prints or mails aid-related publications, though they are available online for users to download and print. For more information on electronic versions of publications, fact sheets, online tools, and other resources, please go to [FinancialAidToolkit.ed.gov/resources](#) and/or [StudentAid.gov/resources](#).

There are many advantages to filing electronically rather than using the paper FAFSA form, including:

- Faster processing
- Availability of online help
- Skip logic, which allows applicants to skip over questions that don't pertain to them;
- Fewer errors and rejected applications because internal and end-of-entry data edits ensure that required fields are completed and conflicts are resolved prior to submission.

FAFSA on the phone

Students who have limited or no Internet access and face pressing deadlines can choose to complete and submit their application by calling 1-800-433-3243, telling a representative they would like to fill out their FAFSA form over the phone, and providing their information. This typically takes about half an hour. Students will receive a paper student aid report (SAR) 7 to 10 days later, which they (and their parents, if appropriate) must sign and return. This method should be used sparingly.

FSA ID

Students use the FSA ID to log on to the FAFSA online and other FSA websites with an account username and password they create. Parents and students can electronically sign the FAFSA form but must do so with their own FSA ID. A verified email address or cell phone number can be used instead of the username. Users can [create an FSA ID online](#) quickly and securely.

Renewal FAFSA

A student who has received an FSA ID and who the year before had an ISIR with a successful match on Social Security number (SSN), name, and date of birth with the Social Security Administration (SSA) is eligible for a renewal FAFSA form. When the student logs in to the electronic FAFSA form, he or she will be asked if he or she wants to pre-fill some of the application with data from the prior year. By choosing this option, the student can review each pre-filled item, update it if it has changed, and provide new information as needed. If an aid administrator's school does not appear on the renewal application, he or she can use the student's data release number (DRN) to access the application in FAA Access to CPS Online.

In October–November 2022, students with a valid email address in the CPS who submitted FAFSA information for the 2022–2023 award year and have not yet done so for 2023–2024 will receive an email encouraging them to complete the new application early. In addition, in January–February 2023, renewal-eligible students who still have not submitted 2023–2024 FAFSA information will receive a renewal reminder as in previous years.

Because students from Palau, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia (known collectively as the Freely Associated States) are not eligible for an FSA ID (for lack of an SSN), they cannot pre-fill data in the online FAFSA form. But an FAA can use FAA Access to CPS Online to enter renewal applications for these students if they meet the renewal application eligibility requirements.

FAFSA filers under the age of 13

Because the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) of 1998 prohibits any entity, including a government agency, from electronically conducting business or communicating with a person under age 13, applicants who are 12 or younger cannot complete the FAFSA online. Instead, when they apply for financial aid, they or a parent or legal guardian, financial aid administrator, or high school counselor can fill out the appropriate award year PDF FAFSA and mail it to

Federal Student Aid Programs
Attn: COPPA/CORR Process Building 1
1084 South Laurel Road
London, KY 40744

Such applicants should not provide an email address on the application or any correction that might follow. After the FAFSA form is submitted, it will be processed and a paper SAR will be sent to the student and a regular ISIR will be sent to schools. See the [April 25, 2022, announcement](#) for more information.

Processing the FAFSA

Applications that are signed and submitted online go directly to the CPS. The PDF FAFSA forms go to the FAFSA processor for data entry and then to the CPS. If a web applicant indicated he or she would sign electronically later or send a paper signature page, his or her FAFSA information goes to a signature hold file for up to 14 days. If some type of signature is not received in that time, the application will be sent to the CPS but will be rejected; it won't be processed again until a

signature is received.

The CPS uses application data to calculate the EFC and to match against several databases: NSLDS, the Department of Defense, the Department of Justice, the SSA, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as the Department of Homeland Security's database of noncitizens.

The CPS also checks the application for possible inconsistencies and mistakes. For instance, if a dependent student reported the parents' marital status as married but reported the household size as "2," the edit checks would catch the inconsistency. Even when data is inconsistent, the CPS may be able to calculate an EFC based on assumptions. For applications that your school submits through FAA Access, you can anticipate certain assumptions and correct or override information on the student's FAFSA form submission. Students who submit applications online can also correct or override some of the CPS edits before submitting the application.

Output Documents: The SAR and ISIR

After processing is complete, the CPS produces output documents that show the information the student originally provided, the EFC, the results of the eligibility matches, and information about aid history and about any inconsistencies identified through the CPS edits. If the CPS was unable to calculate an EFC, the output record will not show one.

The output documents are the *Institutional Student Information Record* (ISIR), which is made available electronically to the schools the student listed on the FAFSA form (or added later) and their state agency, and the *Student Aid Report* (SAR), which is sent to the student or made available to him or her online.

You will receive an ISIR for the student only if he or she includes your school on their FAFSA form. If your school is not listed, you can request an ISIR for the student through FAA Access by adding your federal school code if you have his or her DRN, which authorizes your access to the student's application information. The DRN appears in the upper right corner of the first page of the SAR and at the top of some of the correctable pages.

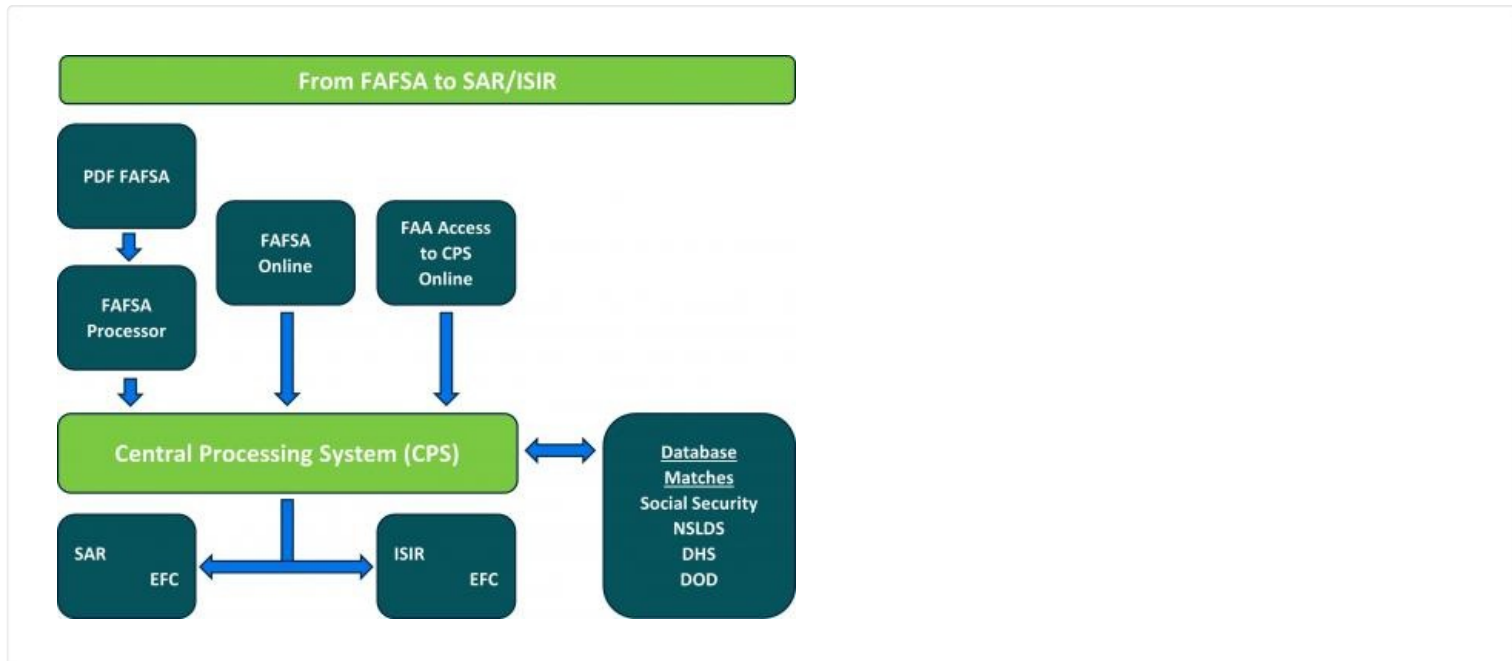
You are required to receive ISIRs and to accept SARs from students, but you cannot require them to submit SARs to receive aid. If you don't have an ISIR for a student, your federal school code must be added to his or her record so an ISIR is sent to you. We recommend making corrections electronically via the online FAFSA (the student) or FAA Access (the school); however, you can require students to use a SAR to make corrections. If you don't have an ISIR for a student who provided a SAR or SAR Acknowledgement, you must use the SAR or the acknowledgement to award and disburse the student aid. Again, you must also ensure that your school code is added to the student's CPS record (see the "How to Submit Corrections and Updates" section in Chapter 4).

The SAR arrives in one of three ways:

1. Students who give a valid email address will receive an email with a link to an online SAR.
2. Students who apply with a PDF FAFSA form and don't give a valid email address will receive a paper SAR. They will also receive a paper SAR if a student or parent signature is missing; that SAR must be signed and returned for processing.
3. Students who apply electronically and don't give a valid email address will receive a paper SAR Acknowledgement, which has fewer and less detailed comments than the SAR and can't be used for corrections as the SAR can.

The SARs and ISIRs include comment codes and text explaining any questionable results from the matches and edits described here. For some of these there will also be a C code, which you must resolve before paying the student aid. For instance, if a student has defaulted on a federal student loan, the SAR and ISIR will note this in several places, including comments to the student and the NSLDS financial aid history page.

For other problems, the SAR and ISIR will show that the FAFSA has been rejected and no EFC has been calculated. The SAR will tell the student how to remove the reject by providing signatures, more information or by correcting errors. Reject codes are given in the FAA Information section, and a complete list of them is in [The ISIR Guide 2023-2024](#).



A valid SAR or ISIR is one on which all the information reported on a student’s FAFSA is accurate and complete as of the date the application is signed ([34 CFR 668.2](#)).

Deadlines

The application processing cycle lasts 21 months. For the 2023-2024 award year, applications are accepted beginning October 1, 2022, and will be accepted through June 30, 2024.

The CPS must receive a student’s electronic FAFSA information by June 30, 2024. A paper FAFSA form must be legible, and it must be mailed to the Federal Student Aid Programs address listed on the FAFSA form in time for the processor to receive it by June 30, 2024. There are no exceptions to these deadlines. An electronic application cannot be received before October 1, 2022, and if it is received after June 30, 2024, it will not be processed. A paper application received before October 1, 2022, or after June 30, 2024, will be returned unprocessed with a letter of explanation. If it is signed before and received after October 1, 2022, it will be accepted, but the student will receive a rejected SAR asking him or her to date and re-sign the SAR and return it for processing.

For other deadlines pertaining to corrections, changes, disbursements, and verification, see the official deadline notice for the 2023–2024 award year. It will provide all the processing deadline dates and will be available in the Knowledge Center website under “[Federal Registers](#).” For these deadlines, the date the CPS processed the ISIR transaction is the date the institution received the ISIR. On the SAR, SAR Acknowledgement, and ISIR printout, the processed date is above the EFC on the first page.

Students who submit the FAFSA form later in the award year can receive aid for the entire year, including completed payment periods, if they were not ineligible at the time. See the section on retroactive disbursements for completed periods in *Volume 3*.

Websites for students

<https://studentaid.gov/>—Higher education portal that contains resources and information about paying for college. The site includes access to the FAFSA application loan information, counseling, repayment, and other tools to help future, current, and former students access financial aid.

<https://studentaid.gov/fafsa>—Submit a FAFSA or make corrections to a previously submitted application; get an online SAR; check status of an application

<https://studentaid.gov/aid-estimator/>The *Federal Student Aid Estimator* can help applicants understand their

options to pay for college or career school by providing an early estimate of the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) and eligibility for federal student aid.

<https://studentaid.gov/fsa-id/create-account/launch>—Create an FSA ID and account, which allows students, parents, and other borrowers access to the StudentAid.gov portal.

Resources for schools

[CPS Web applications demo](#)—You can use the FAFSA on the Web demonstration site to train financial aid staff or to show students how to use the online application. Go to the bottom of <https://fafsademo.test.ed.gov> and choose the link to the FOTW demo (there is also an FAA Access demo).

[2023-2024 Summary of Changes for the Application Processing System](#)—Go to <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center> and select Resource Type (under Library) > Handbooks, Manuals, or Guides > 2023-2024 > Summary of Changes for the Application Processing System Guide.

[CPS/SAIG Technical Support](#)—For questions related to the Central Processing System (CPS), the Student Aid Internet Gateway (SAIG), web products such as FAA Access to CPS Online, and assistance with software products such as EDconnect and EDExpress. Questions related to Two Factor Authentication (TFA) tokens may also be directed here. Call or email CPS customer service: 1-800-330-5947, CPSSAIG@ed.gov

[Technical system publications](#)—Federal Student Aid has consolidated software and other tools used by the financial aid community for student aid processing on this page.

[FSA Help Center](#)—Go to fsapartners.ed.gov/help-center for additional help and resources, including contact information for FSA Customer Service Centers.

Filling Out the FAFSA

The FAFSA form is the first step in the financial aid process. Because it's important to complete the form correctly, this chapter discusses some of the more difficult questions that arise. While the chapter follows the organization of the paper application and the ISIR, the guidance applies equally to the FAFSA online. To see how FAFSA data are used to calculate the expected family contribution (EFC), please refer to Chapter 3.

The FAFSA form is organized as steps, each consisting of a group of related questions. There are also instructions on how to fill out the form. The guidance in this chapter supplements those instructions and explains why some of the questions are needed on the FAFSA form.

Students can get advice on filling out the FAFSA online at <https://studentaid.gov/resources>. You may want to link to this reference from pages that students use on your website or use certain graphics, videos or publications referenced on the site when working with your students.

The parents mentioned are those of dependent students. The numbers in parentheses are for the items as they appear on the SAR, ISIR, paper FAFSA, and FAA Access to CPS Online. As of the date the FAFSA form is signed, it is considered a “snapshot” of the family’s information that can be updated only in certain circumstances and only for certain items; see *Chapter 4*.

The following sections discuss many of the important questions found within each Step on the FAFSA form.

Step One: General Student Information

This step identifies the student and establishes his or her aid eligibility based on factors such as citizenship and educational level (see also Volume 1: Student Eligibility). Questions in Step One are included to help the school package awards and to eliminate the need for students to fill out a separate state or school financial aid form.

- **Student’s name (1-3).** The name, with other identifying information, is used for several data matches. Because the U.S. Department of Education (ED) matches the student’s name and Social Security number (SSN) with the Social Security Administration (SSA), the name here should match the one in the SSA’s records (i.e., as it appears on the student’s Social Security card).
- **Permanent mailing address (4-7).** This is the student’s permanent home address, with two exceptions: incarcerated students should use the address of the facility they are in, and homeless youth should use a mailing address where they can reliably receive mail. That can be the address of a relative or friend who has given them permission to use it, or it can be their school’s address as long as they have contacted the school for permission and instructions on how mail they receive at the school will reach them. As soon as incarcerated and homeless students have more permanent housing, they should update their address on the FAFSA form.
 - Incarcerated students should use the address of the facility they are in, and
 - Homeless youth should use a mailing address where they can reliably receive mail. That can be the address of a relative or friend who has given them permission to use it, or it can be their school’s address if they have contacted the school for permission and instructions on how mail they receive at the school will reach them.
 - As soon as incarcerated and homeless students have more permanent housing, they should update their address on the FAFSA form.
- **Student’s SSN (8).** Students must have an SSN to apply for federal student aid except as noted below. If they submit FAFSA information without an SSN, the FAFSA form will be returned unprocessed. To get an SSN or to find out what the number is if they lost their Social Security card, they must contact the local SSA office. Contact the SSA at 1-800-772-1213 or <https://www.ssa.gov/ssnumber/> for more information.

Students who enter the wrong SSN on their FAFSA form can correct it in a few ways: through the school, by submitting a corrected paper SAR, or by filing a new FAFSA form. If they don’t have a copy of their SAR, they can call the Federal Student Aid Information Center (1-800-433-3243) and have one sent to them, which they can correct and mail to the address on the SAR. However, correcting the SSN through the school or with the SAR will not change the number in the student’s identifier; that will remain the original SSN and may later cause confusion. Completing and submitting a new FAFSA form solves this problem. Note that there are other rare instances where a student must

submit a special “correction application.” See the [June 22, 2017, announcement](#).

Persons from the Freely Associated States (FAS)—the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau—typically do not have SSNs. Students who are completing a FAFSA form for the first time and who indicate that their state of legal residence is one of the above Pacific Island groups should enter “666” as the first three digits in the SSN field and leave the remaining six digits blank. CPS will assign them an identification number. Students from the FAS who have submitted a FAFSA form before and were issued such a pseudo-SSN will enter it in the SSN field. **It is important that they use the same number on all subsequent FAFSAs** because it allows for more accurate information on Pell Grant Lifetime Eligibility Used (LEU).

If a student does not use the same pseudo-SSN across award years—if on a subsequent FAFSA form he or she either gets a new pseudo-SSN and uses that or if he or she uses a real SSN that he or she obtained from the SSA—the school must contact the [COD School Relations Center](#) so the multiple student records can be merged into one and the correct LEU can be calculated. Also, if Pacific Island students file with a real SSN, schools will need to have an alternate way, other than the pseudo-SSN, of identifying that population to ensure that the correct award limitations described in *Volume 1, Chapter 2* of the Handbook are in place for those students.

- **Student’s email address (13).** If the student provides this address, he or she should get an email with a link to his or her online SAR data within one to three days after the CPS receives his or her application. The Department will also use this email address to correspond with the student regarding his or her application.
- **Citizenship status (14).** Examples of eligible noncitizen categories are given in the FAFSA instructions, and a detailed discussion of citizenship issues can be found in *Volume 1: Student Eligibility*. Only U.S. citizens or certain classes of noncitizens are eligible for Title IV aid; however, other students can still submit the FAFSA because they might be eligible for aid from institutional, state, or private sources that do not have the same requirements but use FAFSA information.
- **Alien Registration Number (15).** Students who answer “No, but I am an eligible noncitizen” to question (14) should include their A-Number.
- **Student’s marital status (16 and 17).** This is marital status “as of today”—the day the application is signed. Marital status cannot be projected. It can be updated in limited circumstances; see *Chapter 4*.
- **Student’s state and date of legal residence (18-20).** This is used to calculate the allowance for state and other taxes for the EFC calculation.

It also indicates which state agency should receive the student’s FAFSA information. States have varying criteria for determining whether the student is a resident for purposes of their financial aid. However, residing in one state for five years will meet any state’s criteria. Therefore, a person answering “Yes” to Question 19 will likely meet the residency requirements of the state reported in Question 18, while the state eligibility for a person answering “No” will depend on the date reported in Question 20 and the state’s requirements.

- **Highest level of school completed by student’s parents (21 and 22).** Some state agencies use this information to award grants and scholarships.
- **High school completion status (23).** The student indicates one of the following: high school diploma, General Educational Development (GED) certificate or state certificate, homeschooled, or none of the above. “None of the above” includes those who have the recognized equivalent of a high school diploma (as defined in [34 CFR 600.2](#)) other than a GED certificate or a state certificate or who may qualify under the Ability-to-Benefit (ATB) alternatives; see *Volume 1, Chapter 1*, for an explanation of those options. Typically a foreign secondary education credential counts as a high school diploma; see [FHD-Q1 on the program integrity website](#).

A state certificate is what students receive after passing a “state authorized examination,” as referred to in [34 CFR 600.2](#). This includes tests comparable to the GED—i.e., those created and distributed by a test publisher—such as the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) or the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), as well as those established by states, for example, the California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE). California considers a passing grade on the CHSPE to be equivalent to a diploma.

- **High school (24).** This question asks for the name of the high school where the student received or will receive his or her diploma, as well as the city and state (or FC for foreign country) where it is located. On the FAFSA website, the student can choose the name from the dropdown list, or, if it is not on the list, the student will enter the school name, city, and state directly on the FAFSA form. See *Volume 1, Chapter 1*, regarding a school’s policy about checking the validity of a high school education.

- **First bachelor's degree (25).** The student indicates whether he or she will have a first bachelor's degree before beginning the 2023-2024 year because eligibility for Pell and Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity grants (FSEOGs) is almost exclusively restricted to students who have not received a bachelor's degree or completed the requirements for one. See "Pell Grants" in *Chapter 5 of Volume 1* regarding degrees from unaccredited and foreign schools, which can count as bachelor's degrees for Pell and FSEOG eligibility.
- **Student's college grade level at the start of the school year (26).** This is not based on the number of years the student has attended college but on work completed toward the degree/certificate. For instance, a full-time student might attain second-year grade level after one year of study, while a half-time student would take two years to reach that level.
- **Intended degree or certificate (27).** Students should answer this question based on the degree or certificate program they will be working on at the start of the 2023-2024 award year.

Definitions

Undergraduate student—One who is enrolled in a program that usually does not exceed four academic years or a longer program that leads to a first degree at the baccalaureate level. Students in programs longer than five years are considered undergraduates for only the first four years.

For the FSEOG, Pell, and TEACH Grant programs, a student is an undergraduate only if he or she has not earned, or completed the requirements for, a bachelor's or professional degree. Students enrolled in a post baccalaureate program as described in [34 CFR 686.2\(d\)](#) and [690.6](#) are still undergraduates for receiving TEACH and Pell grants but not FSEOG.

Students in dual degree programs that confer a bachelor's degree and either a graduate or first professional degree are undergraduates for at least the first three years of the program. The school determines at what point after three years they cease to be undergraduates. [\[34 CFR 668.2\(b\)\]](#)

Graduate or professional student—One who (1) is not receiving aid as an undergraduate for the same period of enrollment; (2) is enrolled in a program above the bachelor's degree level or one leading to a professional degree; and (3) has completed the equivalent of at least three years of full-time study, either before entrance into the program or as part of it.

Measured in credit hours, three years of full-time study must be at least three times the annual minimum for full-time study: 72 (24x3) semester or trimester hours or 108 (36x3) quarter hours. [\[34 CFR 668.2\(b\)\]](#)

- **Interest in work-study (28).** The student indicates whether he or she is interested in receiving Federal Work-Study (FWS). This helps the school in packaging the student's award. If the student is unsure about wanting FWS, he or she should answer "don't know" to still be considered for it; later he or she can decline any aid he or she does not want.

Steps Two and Four: Income and Assets

Step Two (questions 29-41) ask for the student's and spouse's income and assets [HEA Sec. 480(a), (b), (f), (g)]. Step Four (questions 76-89) collects similar information about parent income and assets, so the following discussion also applies to parents.

If the student or his or her parent was not married in 2021 but is married when the application is signed, the student also needs to provide income and asset information for the new spouse. If the student or their parent was married in 2021 but is separated, divorced, or widowed when the application is signed, the student or parent excludes the income and assets for that spouse even though the information may be on the 2021 tax forms.

The FAFSA form asks for income and taxes paid according to lines on the IRS tax forms for 2021, the "base year" for 2023-2024. Data from the completed tax year is used as a predictor of the family's financial situation for the current year. In the rare instance that 2021 tax data is not available yet, best estimates can be used on the application. However, the

student is asked to correct this information later when the tax return is filed.

Information from the income tax returns required by the tax codes of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, and the U.S. Virgin Islands is reported on the FAFSA form in the same manner as U.S. tax information, and copies of these forms can be used for verification in the same way as U.S. tax forms are. Amounts are already reported in U.S. dollars, and the school should look at tax return line items that are comparable to the IRS line items for verification.

When a student or parent has returns from both a foreign nation and the United States for the same tax year, they should use the data from the U.S. return when filling out the FAFSA form.

The FAFSA application also collects information for certain investments and other assets. Applicants only report the net worth of assets instead of reporting the value and debt. They should report asset amounts **as of the date the application is signed**.

- **Tax return filed and tax filing status (29-32, 76-79 for parents).** These questions ask if a 2021 tax return was completed, which return was or will be filed, what the filing status was or will be, and whether the student or parents filed a Schedule 1 or did so only to claim one or more of the following: unemployment compensation, an Alaska Permanent Fund dividend, educator expenses, an IRA deduction, or the student loan interest deduction. The answers are used in part to identify if the student is eligible for the simplified needs test or the auto zero EFC and to find inconsistencies between the FAFSA form and the tax return.

Married filing separately

When a student and spouse or a dependent student's parents file separate and different types of returns, what type should be indicated in Question 30 or 77

In such cases, IRS Form 1040 and foreign tax returns are considered comparable and take precedence over tax returns from the five inhabited U.S. territories: Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa. For example, if a student filed a foreign return and his or her spouse filed a Puerto Rican return, the student would answer foreign tax return for question 30. When comparable but different returns are filed, the IRS return takes precedence and is indicated. If the above student filed a 1040 return and his or her spouse filed a foreign return, the student would answer IRS 1040 to the question.

If one spouse files separately and the other does not file a return but has income, how do you calculate the AGI?

Add the income earned from work (e.g., earnings from the W-2 form or any other earning statements) of the spouse who does not file a return to the AGI (as given on line 11 of Form 1040) of the spouse who does and enter the sum on the appropriate AGI line of the FAFSA.

- **Adjusted gross income (AGI), income tax, and income earned from work (33-36, 81-84 for parents).** These items are reported for dependent students, their parents, and independent students. Each question gives the line reference to the 2021 IRS tax forms.
Though students and parents may manually enter their IRS data in the FAFSA, they are strongly encouraged to transfer it with the DRT because that method is accurate, efficient, and useful for verification.
Those who file a joint return and then are divorced, separated, or widowed before the application is signed won't be able to simply copy the information from the tax forms or transfer data with the DRT. Instead, they must figure out how much of the income and taxes paid is attributable to them and not their spouse. For more on this calculation, see "Using a joint return to figure individual AGI and taxes paid" in *Chapter 4*.
If the student, spouse, or parents were not required to file a tax return, the student should still report any income earned from work in questions 35-36 (student and spouse) and questions 83-84 (parents). The W-2 form and other records of work earnings should be used to determine these amounts. Do not include combat pay; because it is not

counted as untaxed income and is removed from the AGI when it is taxable, it should not be included in the income earned from work.

The FAFSA form instructs the applicant to add line 1 of the 1040 form to lines 3 and 6 of Schedule 1 and box 14 (code A) of Schedule K-1 (Form 1065) as an option for determining the income earned from work. But when the values of lines 3 or 6 or box 14 are negative, this will reduce the total and can wrongly affect the Social Security allowance. If values from lines 3 or 6 or box 14 are negative, treat them as zero when determining the income earned from work.

Income earned from work is used to calculate allowances for the Social Security and Medicare tax (aka the Federal Insurance Contributions Act or FICA tax) and for the added costs incurred by two working spouses. For non-tax filers it will also be used in place of AGI and will cause the application to be rejected if it is above the tax filing threshold.

For a fiscal year (rather than calendar year) tax return, information should be used from the return that includes the greater number of months in 2021.

Example: Owen's parents file a fiscal year tax return. Their fiscal year begins in September. The return they filed for the fiscal year starting in September 2020 includes eight months in 2021. The return they filed for the fiscal year starting in September 2021 only includes four months of 2021. Therefore, they should use the information from the return for the fiscal year that began in September 2020.

If the student or parents filed a tax return using something other than an IRS form, such as a foreign or Puerto Rican tax form, the student should report on the FAFSA form the amounts (converted to U.S. dollars) from the lines of the form that correspond most closely to those on the common IRS forms.

IRS Data Retrieval Tool

The IRS Data Retrieval Tool (DRT) allows students and parents who use the online FAFSA and who have already submitted their federal tax return to electronically retrieve their tax data from the IRS database. The ISIR will show that data was imported and if it was altered. All students and parents of dependent students who indicate on the application that they have already filed a federal tax return and who are otherwise eligible to use the DRT will be directed to do so.

The DRT will automatically answer the question about whether a tax filer filed a Schedule 1. The answer will be based on all current exceptions for filing a Schedule 1 and the transferred data for the Schedule 1 fields will be handled the same as other data transferred using the IRS DRT.

The actual values of the imported data are not viewable by students and parents (though they still appear on the ISIR). This is to enhance security and privacy and to prevent the misuse of sensitive data. Because aid officers and other officials will be able to see the transferred data, and in keeping with the expectation that they protect the confidentiality of data associated with the Title IV programs, they must not disclose income and tax information from the FAFSA form with the applicant, the applicant's spouse, or the applicant's parents unless they can authenticate their identity. For example, a student appearing in person and presenting an unexpired, valid, government-issued photo ID such as a driver's license would be an effective way to authenticate his or her identity. See the [September 5, 2017, announcement](#) for more information.

As a result of IRS data being masked, students and parents will not be able to change it on the FAFSA; the financial aid office will need to make corrections. Also, rollovers will be handled differently. If the DRT transfers a non-zero amount into the untaxed pension or individual retirement account (IRA) distribution field, the applicant will be asked if any of it is due to a rollover. If he or she answers yes, he or she will then enter the rollover amount, which the CPS will subtract when calculating the EFC. And because of the data masking, students and parents who file a joint tax return will not be able to transfer their income earned from work but will have to manually enter those amounts. The income earned from work of single persons will, however, continue to transfer. See the [August 7, 2017, announcement](#).

When the ISIR shows an IRS Request Flag value of 06 or 07, schools will need to contact the student or parent. A value of 06 indicates that after the DRT was used and the FAFSA was submitted, the student or parent changed an item on the FAFSA (e.g., the date of marriage) that would have made the person ineligible to use the DRT. The school must contact the student or parent to determine if all the transferred data was correct or if it needs to be corrected. A value of 07 is an indication from the IRS that the student or parent used the DRT but also has filed an amended tax return for the relevant year (includes amended returns generated by IRS adjustments). *Because the data that was transferred will be from the original return and not the amended one, the school must contact the student or parent and make any applicable corrections to FAFSA items, regardless of whether the application was selected for verification.*

The ISIR will display IRS Data Field flags that indicate if any individual item was transferred from the IRS and if it was subsequently changed. A flag value of 1 will indicate that the item was transferred and was not changed. Such items do not need to be verified if the student is selected for verification. However, when there is a Request Flag value of 06 or 07, the above guidance must first be followed. The August 7 announcement has more information.

Also due to the IRS data masking, there are two comment codes that schools must respond to: code 400 for parents and 401 for students. When an ISIR indicates either of these codes, the school must check the FAFSA to see if any of the following conditions exist and make necessary corrections:

1. The student or parent is a tax filer and the AGI transferred from the IRS is zero, but the total income earned from work is greater than zero.
2. The total of the taxable income offsets (see the “taxable income offsets section later in this chapter) for the student or parents is greater than the AGI transferred from the IRS.
3. Any of the untaxed income items (see the “Untaxed income” section later in this chapter) for the student or parent is greater than or equal to the AGI transferred from the IRS.

The school may need to contact the student or parent for an explanation of one of the above conditions and to determine if any of the associated FAFSA items need to be corrected. Also, comment codes 400 and 401 can be considered resolved if (V1 or V5) verification is completed for the same ISIR. Again, see the August 7 announcement for more information.

Non-tax filers, foreign countries, and international organizations

In some countries the tax system does not operate as it does in the U.S., and people in those countries can earn a substantial amount of income and pay taxes without having to file a return. In such a case the person would correctly indicate that he or she did not file a tax return, and nothing will be reported for AGI or income tax paid. When that happens, he or she should report any *net income that is earned from work* in Question 35, 36, 83, or 84, as appropriate, of the FAFSA form and not as untaxed income in Question 41h or 89h, which is where untaxed foreign income **not earned** from work should be reported. This ensures that the income is properly included in the EFC calculation; for non-tax filers, income earned from work is used in place of the AGI and to determine eligibility for the simplified needs test (SNT) and automatic zero EFC.

As noted earlier, when income earned from work exceeds the U.S. tax filing threshold and the person indicates he or she is not going to file a return, the FAFSA form will be rejected. The aid office must override the reject in FAA Access to CPS Online so that an EFC will be generated.

What happens when one spouse files a return, but the other spouse does not file a return but has foreign earned income as described above? Because one spouse filed a return, the FAFSA form should indicate in Question 30 or 77 what return was or will be filed, and the CPS will use the AGI for income and to determine eligibility for the SNT and auto-zero EFC. As above, the foreign income is still reported as income earned from work, but it is also added to the AGI of the tax filing spouse, as our guidance instructs under the “married filing separately” section described earlier in this chapter.

In some instances, employees of certain international organizations, such as the United Nations, the International

Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and others, **might not** be required to file a return, which results in situations like those described above. Follow the same guidance—a non-tax filer will report income from that employment as income earned from work only, while a person who is married to a tax filer will report it as income earned from work and add it to the AGI of the tax-filing spouse.

Note that the guidance in this section does not pertain to the Foreign Earned Income Exclusion, which is reported on the U.S. tax return and is excluded from the EFC calculation by the HEA.

- **Assets (37-39, 85-87 for parents).** An asset is property that the family owns and has an exchange value. The FAFSA form collects current data (as of the day of signing the FAFSA form) about cash, savings and checking accounts, investments, businesses, and investment farms. Most assets are **investments** such as college savings plans, Coverdell education savings accounts, real estate, installment and land sale contracts (including mortgages held), trust funds, mutual funds, money market funds, Uniform Gifts and Uniform Transfers to Minors (UGMA and UTMA) accounts, certificates of deposit, stocks, stock options, bonds, commodities, and precious metals. If the asset isn't a business or investment farm, it is reported as an investment.

The FAFSA form asks for the net worth of investments, which is their total current market value minus their associated debts. If their net worth is negative, zero should be reported.

Similarly, for a **business or investment farm**, the current net worth (the current market value minus the debt owed on it) is reported for land, buildings, machinery, equipment, livestock, and inventories. Business or farm debt means only those debts for which the business or farm was used as collateral.

Qualified education benefits include qualified tuition programs (QTPs, also known as section 529 plans, because they are covered in section 529 of the IRS tax code) and Coverdell education savings accounts. They are grouped together in the law and have the same treatment: they are an asset of the owner (not the beneficiary because the owner can change the beneficiary at any time) except when the owner is a dependent student, in which case they are an asset of the parent. When the owner is some other person (including a noncustodial parent), distributions from these plans to the student count as untaxed income, as "money received." When a parent owns a plan for a child and the parent is filing a FAFSA application as a student for himself or herself, the plan counts as an asset on the parent's FAFSA form.

States, their agencies, and some colleges sponsor qualified tuition programs. The IRS mentions two types of QTPs that are commonly called prepaid tuition plans and college savings plans. States may offer both types, but colleges may only sponsor prepaid tuition plans.

Prepaid tuition plans allow a person to buy tuition credits or certificates, which count as units of attendance. The number of units doesn't change even though tuition will likely increase before the beneficiary uses the tuition credits. They are an asset of the plan owner, and their worth is the refund value of the credits or certificates.

College savings plans allow a benefactor to deposit money into an account that will be used for the beneficiary's college expenses. The buyer does not pre-purchase tuition credits as with a prepaid tuition plan. Rather, this type of plan is essentially a savings account, and its value as an asset is the current balance of the account.

Coverdell education savings accounts, or ESAs, are another tax-advantaged savings vehicle for college education. They are treated the same as college savings plans: the current balance is an asset of the account owner.

If distributions from QTPs and ESAs do not exceed the qualified education expenses for which they are intended, they are tax-free, so they will not appear in the next year's AGI. They should not be treated as untaxed income (except in the cases mentioned above) or as estimated financial assistance. For more information on these benefits, see the IRS's Publication 970, *Tax Benefits for Education*.

Rental properties are an asset. A unit within a family home that has its own entrance, kitchen, and bath (therefore a rented bedroom would not count) and that is rented to someone other than a family member counts as an asset. To calculate its net value, multiply the net value of the entire structure by the fraction the rented space represents. Similarly, if a family owned a 10-unit apartment building and lived in one of the apartments, 9/10 or 90% of the net value of the building would be an asset. At times a student or parent will claim rental property as a business. Generally, it must be reported as real estate instead. A rental property would have to be part of a formally recognized business to be reported as such, and it usually would provide additional services like regular cleaning, linen, or maid service.

Take-back mortgage value should be reported as an asset. In a take-back mortgage, the seller of a house finances a portion of its cost for the buyer, who repays this additional mortgage to the seller. The seller reports the interest part of any payments received from the buyer on Schedule B of IRS Form 1040. Therefore, if a student or his or her parents report such interest on the tax return, it likely indicates an asset that should be reported on the FAFSA form: the value of the take-back mortgage. There would be no debt reported against this asset. For example, if a dependent student's parents sold their house for \$200,000 and financed a take back mortgage of \$40,000 to the buyer, the parents should report \$40,000 as the net worth of the investment. The worth will decrease each year depending on how much of the principal the buyer paid back that year. This concept applies to other forms of seller financing of the sale of a home or other property.

Virtual currency such as Bitcoin is considered an asset. If a student, student's spouse, or parent (as applicable) holds Bitcoin, they must report its value in U.S. dollars (as of the day the FAFSA form is completed) as an asset on the FAFSA form. If the student or parent sells Bitcoin and has a capital gain from the sale, the taxable portion will end up in the AGI for the year it is reported on the tax return, and the AGI will then be included on the associated FAFSA form. For more information on how the IRS treats virtual currencies, please see the [IRS virtual currency webpage](#).

Uniform Gifts and Uniform Transfers to Minors Acts (UGMA and UTMA) allow the establishment of an account for gifts of cash and financial assets for a minor without the expense of creating a trust. Because the minor is the owner of the account, it counts as his or her asset on the FAFSA form, not the asset of the custodian, who is often the parent.

Trust funds in the name of a student, spouse, or parent should be reported as that person's asset on the application, generally even if the beneficiary's access to the trust is restricted. If the settlor of a trust has voluntarily placed restrictions on its use, then the student should report its present value as an asset, as discussed below. If a trust has been restricted by court order, however, the student should not report it. An example of such a restricted trust is one set up by court order to pay for future surgery for the victim of a car accident.

How the trust must be reported depends on whether the student (or dependent student's parent) receives or will receive the interest income, the trust principal, or both. In the case of a divorce or separation where the trust is owned jointly and ownership is not being contested, the property and the debt are equally divided between the owners for reporting purposes unless the terms of the trust specify some other method of division.

If a student, spouse, or parent receives **interest only** from the trust, any interest received in the base year must be reported as income. If the interest accumulates and is not paid out, the recipient must report an asset value for the interest he or she will receive. The trust officer can usually calculate the value of the interest the person will receive while the trust exists. This value represents the amount a third person would be willing to pay for the interest income.

The person who will receive **principal only** from the trust must report the present value of his or her right to that principal as an asset. For example, if a \$10,000 principal reverts to a dependent student's parents when the trust ends in 10 years and the student is receiving the interest, he or she would report the interest received as income and report the present value of his or her parents' rights to the principal as a parental asset. The present value of the principal can be calculated by the trust officer; it's the amount that a third person would pay for the right to receive the principal 10 years from now—basically, the amount that one would have to deposit now to receive \$10,000 in 10 years.

If a student, spouse, or parent receives both **interest and principal** from the trust, the student should report the present value of both interest and principal, as described in the discussion of principal only. If the trust is set up so that the interest accumulates within the trust until it ends, the beneficiary should report the present value of the interest and principal that he or she is expected to receive when the trust ends as an asset.

Ownership of an asset

In some cases, the ownership of an asset is divided or contested, which can affect how the student reports the asset.

Part ownership of asset

If the parent or student has only part ownership of an asset, the student should report only the owned part. Generally, the value of an asset and debts against it should be divided equally by the number of people who share ownership unless the share of the asset is determined by the amount invested or the terms of the arrangement specify some other means of division.

Contested ownership

Assets shouldn't be reported if the ownership is being contested. For instance, if the parents are separated and can't sell or borrow against jointly owned property because it's being contested, the parent reporting FAFSA information would not list any net worth for the property. However, if the ownership of the property is not being contested, the parent would report the property as an asset. If ownership of an asset is resolved after the initial application is filed, the student can't update this information.

Lien against, and imminent foreclosure of, an asset

If there's a lien against the asset, the net value of the asset is determined by subtracting any associated debt and the amount of the lien from its total value. If foreclosure of an asset is imminent, the net value of the asset would still be reported until the party making the foreclosure completes legal action to take possession of the asset. If the status of the property changes after the application is filed, the student can't update the asset information.

Excluded assets—the following are NOT reported on the FAFSA Form:

- **Possessions** such as a car, a stereo, clothes, or furniture
- **A family's principal place of residence**, even if it is part of a business
- **A family farm** (including equipment, livestock, etc.) if
 - it is the principal place of residence for the applicant and his or her family (spouse or, for dependent students, parents), and
 - the applicant (or parents of a dependent student) materially participated in the farming operation
- **Family-owned and controlled small businesses** (which can include farms) that have 100 or fewer full-time or full-time equivalent employees. "Family-owned and controlled" means that more than 50% of the business is owned by persons who are directly related or are (or were) related by marriage. (Family members do not have to be counted in the household size for this question.)
- **Retirement and life insurance plans and ABLE accounts.** An ABLE account is a tax-advantaged savings account for a disabled person and his or her family; its value does not count as an asset on the FAFSA form. The value of retirement plans—401(k) plans, pension funds, annuities, noneducation IRAs, Keogh plans, etc.—also is not counted as an asset, but distributions do count as income; they appear in the AGI if taxable and in Questions 41 and 89 if untaxed. Similarly, the cash value or equity of a whole life insurance policy isn't reported as an asset, but an insurance settlement does count as income.

The full amount of the distribution is reported whether it was a lump sum or annual distribution, and it will count as taxable or untaxed income, as appropriate. An exception to reporting pension distributions is when they are rolled over into another retirement plan in the same tax year (rollover).

- **Excluded assets for Native American students.** The law (see HEA Sec. 479C) excludes reporting any income and asset of \$2,000 or less per individual payment (any amount over \$2,000 is reported as untaxed income) received under the Per Capita Act or the Indian Tribal Judgment Funds Use or Distribution Act. It also excludes any income received under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act or the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act. Per capita distributions or the proceeds received from the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations—a tribal purchase of fractionated lands because of the Cobell settlement under the Claims Resolution Act of 2010 (42 U.S.C. 1305)—should also be excluded.

Simplified needs test—The law provides a "simplified EFC" calculation for a student who meets certain income

and tax filing requirements. If the applicant is eligible based on the information on the FAFSA form, the CPS will automatically exclude assets from the EFC calculation. However, some states and schools require this information for their own aid programs.

- **Taxable income offsets (40 and 88).** These questions total certain types of income and other monies that are excluded from income in the need analysis. The CPS subtracts these excluded amounts from the AGI when calculating the EFC.
 - a. **Education tax credits.** These are the American Opportunity and Lifetime Learning tax credits (AOTC and LLC); the FAFSA form refers to Schedule 3 line 3 on the 1040 form. Part of the AOTC can be refundable, that is, payable to tax filers even if they do not owe any federal income tax. The nonrefundable part appears on the same lines of the tax return and the FAFSA form as the LLC. The refundable portion appears on line 29 of the 1040 form. It does not appear on the lines of the FAFSA form for the education tax credits, nor does it count as untaxed income.
 - b. **Child support paid.** Count payments *made* during 2021 because of divorce, separation, or legal requirement by the student, spouse, or parent whose income is reported on the FAFSA form. Don't include support for children in the household.
 - c. **Taxable earnings from need-based work programs.** This includes earnings from Federal Work-Study and need-based employment portions of fellowships or assistantships. The student uses W-2s or other records he or she received for this income.
 - d. **Student grant and scholarship aid.** A student reports only the amount of grants and scholarships received that was reported as taxable income on the return. This includes grant and scholarship (not employment) portions of fellowships and assistantships, as well as taxable stipends and employer tuition reimbursements. Include AmeriCorps benefits (awards, living allowances, and interest accrual payments) except those for health care or childcare. The filer usually writes the taxable amount of the grant or scholarship separately on the tax form next to the line where wages and other earnings are reported. If the amount was reported this way, the student can copy it from the tax form.

Reimbursements and stipends—Employers often help with education costs by paying stipends or reimbursing employees for classes taken. These benefits count as estimated financial assistance (or reduce the cost of attendance) even if they aren't received until the end of the class(es) and are contingent on earning a minimum grade. Any taxable portion received in the prior year and appearing in the AGI is entered in Question 40 or 88.
 - e. **Combat pay or special combat pay.** Enter only the portion that was included in AGI. This should be zero for enlisted persons and warrant officers (including commissioned warrant officers) because their combat pay is entirely nontaxable. For commissioned officers generally, combat pay in excess of the highest enlisted person's pay (plus imminent danger/hostile fire pay) is taxable. To determine the taxable amount, find the total combat pay from the serviceperson's leave and earnings statements and subtract the untaxed portion, which is reported in box 12 of the W-2 form with code Q. See [IRS Publication 3, Armed Forces' Tax Guide](#), for more information.
 - f. **College cooperative education program earnings from work.** The student uses W-2s or other records he or she received for these earnings.

Child support paid example:

Steven and his wife each have a child from a previous relationship who does not live with them and for whom they pay child support. Because Steven provides over half of his daughter's support through his payments, he counts her in his household size. Therefore, he doesn't report the amount of child support he pays on his FAFSA form. Steven's wife isn't providing over half of her son's support, so he isn't included in Steven's household size. Therefore, Steven can report the amount of child support his wife pays.

- **Untaxed income (41 and 89).** These questions total the untaxed income, some of which is reported on the tax form even though it isn't taxed. A student who hasn't filed a return will have to estimate these amounts, and students or parents may need to separate information from a joint return.
 - a. **Payments to tax-deferred or sheltered pension and savings plans (paid directly or withheld from earnings).** This includes untaxed portions of 401(k) and 403(b) plans. These types of payments are listed in boxes 12a through 12d of the W-2 and will have one of the following codes: D, E, F, G, H, or S. Employer contributions to these plans shouldn't be reported as an untaxed benefit.
 - b. **Deductible IRA or Keogh payments.** Payments to an IRA or Keogh plan that are excluded from taxation are reported as untaxed income. These amounts appear on the 1040 form schedule 1 lines 16 and 20.
 - c. **Child support received for all children.** Exclude foster care or adoption payments.
 - d. **Tax-exempt interest income.** Certain types of interest, such as interest on municipal bonds, are tax-exempt. This amount is on line 2a on the 1040 form.
 - e. **Untaxed IRA distributions and pension or annuity payments.** A tax filer determines how much of his or her IRA distribution or pension or annuity payment is taxable when he or she completes his or her tax return. The applicant reports the untaxed portion, which is determined from the tax return, but should not include rollovers (transfers of funds from one IRA to another). These amounts can be found on the 1040 form—(line 4a minus 4b; if negative, use zero) plus (line 5a minus 5b; if negative, use zero)
 - f. **Housing, food, and other living allowances.** Some people, such as clergy, receive these allowances as compensation for their jobs. Money received to pay for rent should also be reported, as should the free use of a house or apartment (the rent or market value of a comparable house or apartment can be used). Similarly, if the student received free room or board in 2021 for a job that was not awarded as student financial aid (including resident advisor positions that provide free room and board as part of the student's non-need-based employment compensation), he or she must report the value of the room and board as untaxed income. Members of the U.S. military report their basic allowance for subsistence (BAS) but not their basic allowance for housing (BAH).
 - g. **Veterans' noneducation benefits.** This includes disability, the death pension, Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), and Veterans Affairs (VA) educational work-study allowances.
 - h. **Any other untaxed income not reported elsewhere.** This includes disability benefits (but not Social Security disability), worker's compensation, tax-free contributions to HSAs (see below), interest income on education IRAs, untaxed portions of Railroad Retirement benefits, black lung benefits, refugee assistance, the untaxed portion of capital gains, and foreign income that wasn't taxed by any government, wasn't earned, and wasn't part of the Foreign Earned Income Exclusion.

Health savings accounts (HSAs) resemble tax-deferred pension and savings plans more than flexible spending arrangements. For example, the balance in an HSA persists from year to year, while that in a flexible spending arrangement must be spent on qualified expenses by the end of the year. Therefore, treat tax-free contributions to an HSA as untaxed income; these will appear on line 13 of Schedule 1 of Form 1040. The balance in the account does not count as an asset, nor would distributions from it count as untaxed income when they are used for qualified medical expenses. Distributions not used for qualified expenses are subject to income tax (and a possible penalty) and will be counted in the adjusted gross income.

Extended foster care payments: Foster children who meet certain criteria can receive benefits until age 21. If these extended payments are under the authority of Title IV, Part E, of the Social Security Act, they are not reported on the FAFSA form. If they are paid under some other authority, e.g., a state foster youth support program, they are reported as untaxed income to the student in Question 41h. See DCL [GEN-13-18](#).

- i. **Money received (41 only).** The student reports any cash support he or she received, but if dependent he or she does not count support received from his or her parents, with one exception: money from a noncustodial parent that is not part of a legal child support agreement is untaxed income to the student. Cash support includes money, gifts, housing, food, clothing, car payments or expenses, medical and dental care, college costs, and money paid to someone else or paid for on his or her behalf. For example, if a friend or relative pays a student's electric bill or part of his or her rent, the student must report the amount as untaxed income. If he or she is living with a friend who pays the rent and the student's name is on the lease, the rent paid on his or her behalf counts as cash support because the student is responsible for payments that his or her friend is making. *Note that only the student reports this item—it does not appear in the parents' untaxed income section.*

Tips on reporting benefits: The student reports the actual dollar amount of benefits received during the year, even if it is an underpayment or an overpayment that will be corrected in the next year. However, if the underpayment or overpayment was adjusted in the same year, only the net amount received during that year would be reported.

Benefits the student or parents receive on behalf of anyone included in their FAFSA household size count as income to them unless the person is an adult (not a child), e.g., a grandmother, who receives the benefits in her name. Such a person is not included in the household size if benefits in her name total more than half of her support.

Box 14 items on the W-2: Schools are not required to review income listed in box 14 of the IRS's W-2 form. There are a few reasons for this. Several of the items the IRS suggests could be reported in box 14 are captured already on the FAFSA form (in adjusted gross income for instance); also, employers could include in box 14 certain nonelective pension plan contributions, which should not be counted in the need analysis. Finally, because no employer is required to provide information in box 14, it is unlikely that employers will be consistent in what they report there. But if you are aware that a box 14 item should be reported—i.e., if it represents discretionary income—you should count it on the appropriate line. For example, clergy parsonage allowances often appear in box 14, and you would count that in Question 41f or 89f.

Income and benefits NOT to be included:

- **Student aid** is accounted for in packaging (see *Volume 3: Calculating Awards and Packaging*); it does not count as income in the calculation of the EFC. Student aid includes tuition benefits a parent receives for a dependent, such as those from the parent's employer. Student aid that was included in the AGI is reported separately on the FAFSA form as an exclusion so that it can be subtracted from income (40d and 88d).
- **Veterans' education benefits.** Appendix A in *Chapter 7 of Volume 3* has the list of excluded benefits. See also the pertinent [August 13, 2009 electronic announcement](#).
- **The value of on-base housing** or the BAH for students or parents in the U.S. military. However, the BAS **does** count as untaxed income.
- **Rent subsidies for low-income housing.**
- **Payments and services received from states for foster care or adoption assistance**, under Part A or Part E of Title IV of the Social Security Act (e.g., Wisconsin's Adoption Assistance Program, which facilitates the adoption of children with special needs).
- **Per capita payments to Native Americans.** See "Assets" section earlier in this chapter.
- **Heating/fuel assistance.** This includes payments or allowances received under the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Act (LIHEA). Payments under the LIHEA are made through state programs that may have different names.
- **Flexible spending arrangements.** These are employee benefit programs, sometimes called "cafeteria plans." Neither contributions to nor payments from these programs should count as untaxed income.
- **Welfare benefits, untaxed Social Security benefits, and the earned income and additional child tax credits.** Welfare benefits are means-tested state or federal supplementary assistance. Examples are benefits from Medicaid (including the Children's Health Insurance Program), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).
- **Combat pay, Foreign Earned Income Exclusion, and credit for federal tax on special fuels.**
- **In-kind support** is support other than money, for example, friends or relatives giving the student food or allowing him or her to live with them rent-free. That support isn't included as untaxed income, though you may use professional judgment (e.g., by reducing the cost of attendance or increasing income) with students who receive such in-kind support. This is not the same as housing and other allowances received as compensation for a job, which, as stated earlier, must be reported. If the student is living with someone who is paying living expenses, it can be difficult to determine whether the support is cash support or in-kind support. The basic rule is: if someone pays a cost the student is obligated to pay, the amount counts as cash support.

Example: Independent student with parental support

Doug is a graduate student, so he's independent even though he still lives with his parents and has no income of his own. Although the FAA at his school can't make him a dependent student, the FAA can decide to use professional judgment to add an amount to his untaxed income to account for the in-kind support his parents provide.

No income reported on the FAFSA form

Occasionally an applicant will report no income for the base year. This can occur when the family has tax write-offs that produce a negative AGI or when the applicant neglected to report untaxed assistance. If the CPS does not select the student for verification, you may still choose to ask him or her for further information about his or her means of support during the base year. Also, you may use professional judgment (PJ) to adjust the income line items to reflect income the family receives that doesn't appear on the tax return.

Any cash support for the student, other than support from a parent for a dependent student, counts as untaxed income and must be reported. In-kind help (see the "Income and benefits not to be included" section later in this chapter) from a friend or relative is not considered untaxed income and would not appear on the FAFSA form, however, you may use PJ to account for the value of that in-kind support in the COA. For example, you could adjust the housing and food component of the COA for a student who lives with his or her aunt and eats meals with his or her family.

EFA or not?

Sometimes it is difficult to account for an outside financial award. If a student receives the award because of postsecondary enrollment, it counts as estimated financial assistance (EFA) if it is not considered wages for employment according to federal or state rules, or if it is considered wages and is based on need. Any amount that appears as income on the tax return will also be included on the appropriate line of item 40 or 88 on the 2023-2024 FAFSA form. If the award is considered wages for employment but is not based on need, then it is not EFA and it remains in income.

Step Three: Dependency Status

Purpose: The law governing the FSA programs is based on the premise that the family is the first source of the student's support, and the law provides several criteria that decide if the student is considered independent of his or her parents for aid eligibility. Note that a student reaching the age of 18 or 21 or living apart from his or her parents does not on its own affect his or her dependency status. For the 2023-2024 year, a student who meets any of the following criteria from HEA Sec. 480(d) is independent—if he or she:

- was born before January 1, 2000;
- is married as of the date he or she applies;
- will be a graduate or professional student when the award year starts;
- is currently serving on active duty for purposes other than training;
- is a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces;
- has dependents other than a spouse;
- was an orphan, foster child, or ward/dependent of the court at any time since the age of 13;
- is an emancipated minor or in legal guardianship or was when the student reached the age of majority in his or her state; or
- was determined at any time since July 1, 2022, to be an unaccompanied homeless youth or unaccompanied, at risk of homelessness, and self-supporting, without regard to such individual's age.

If a student is considered a dependent of his or her parents, the parents' income and assets must be included on the FAFSA form. The CPS will calculate a parent contribution and add it to the student's contribution to derive an EFC.

In unusual cases an aid administrator can determine that a student who doesn't meet any of the independence criteria should still be treated as an independent student. (See "Dependency Overrides" in *Chapter 5*.)

Example: Surviving parent and stepparent

Al's parents divorced when he was five. His mother remarried, and Al lived with her and his stepfather, who did not adopt him. His mother died last year, but his father is still living. Al doesn't meet any of the independence criteria, so he's a dependent student. Because his father is his only parent, Al needs to report his father's information on the FAFSA form, even though he's still living with and being supported by his stepfather.

Example: Student living with relatives

Millie's father is dead, and her mother can't support her, so she is living with her grandmother. Her mother doesn't pay any money for her support. Millie doesn't meet any of the independence criteria, so she must provide parental information. Because her grandmother hasn't adopted her, her grandmother isn't her parent. Millie will have to provide information about her mother on the form unless there are unusual circumstances that would warrant a dependency override or her receiving only unsubsidized loans. In any case, the school might use PJ to account for the grandmother's support.

- **Married (43).** The student must answer this question according to his or her marital status at the time the FAFSA form is signed; after that, the student **cannot** update FAFSA information for changes in his or her marital status except in limited instances; see *Chapter 4*.

A student who is only engaged answers as unmarried unless he or she waits until after the wedding to complete the FAFSA form. For this question a student is considered married if he or she is separated or planning to divorce or if he or she has a relationship that meets the criteria for common-law marriage in their state. A student who was independent only because he or she was married becomes dependent for the next award year if he or she divorces and cannot answer "Yes" to any of the dependency questions.

- **Graduate or professional study (44).** The FAFSA form asks if the student will be working on a master's, doctorate, or graduate certificate program at the beginning of the school year. A student who is a graduate or professional student is independent for purposes of Title IV aid.

Graduate and professional students are not eligible for Pell grants, so a student who incorrectly answers "Yes" to this question must submit a correction before he or she can get a Pell grant, even if he or she is independent for another reason.

Students should fill out the FAFSA form based on their expected grade level at the beginning of the award year. If a dependent student completes his or her undergraduate program during the year and begins graduate school, he or she can update the answer to the dependency question so that the CPS can reprocess the student's application, or the aid administrator at the graduate school can recalculate his or her EFC and use it to package the student graduate aid.

- **Member or veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces (45 and 46).**

Veterans and persons on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces (the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or Coast Guard) for purposes other than training are independent.

Veterans are those who were in active service and were released under a condition other than "dishonorable." This includes those who fraudulently entered the service, if their entire period of service was not voided. There is no minimum amount of time the student must have served to be a veteran—even one day counts and even basic training (boot camp) counts—but it does have to be active service. (See the following rules for reservists.) This is less stringent than the VA's definition of a veteran for receiving certain VA benefits.

The FAFSA form also tells students to answer "Yes" to the question about veteran status if they aren't yet a veteran

but will be by June 30, 2024.

Members of the **National Guard** or **Reserves** are only considered veterans if they were called up to active federal duty [as defined in 10 U.S.C. 101(d)(1)] by presidential order for a purpose other than training. It does not matter how long the active duty lasted or if the student returned to reserve status afterward, but, as with the other qualifying veterans, the student must have had a character of service that was not “dishonorable.”

Students who attended a **U.S. military academy or military academy preparatory school** for at least one day and were released under conditions other than “dishonorable” count as veterans for Title IV purposes. If they are discharged prior to commission (known as “early exit cadets”), they might not be veterans for VA purposes, and their match result will likely show that they aren’t veterans. As with other students who receive this result, if an early exit cadet meets one of the other criteria for independence, no resolution is required. But if he or she meets no other independence criteria, the student must provide the school with documentation that shows he or she was a cadet of a military academy or its preparatory school and was released under a condition other than dishonorable. Students serving in ROTC or currently attending a U.S. military academy are not veterans.

Military service academies and preparatory schools:

- U.S. Military Academy (West Point)
- U.S. Naval Academy (Annapolis)
- U.S. Air Force Academy
- U.S. Coast Guard Academy
- U.S. Merchant Marine Academy
- U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School
- Naval Academy Preparatory School
- U.S. Air Force Academy Preparatory School

Veteran match (for Question 46)

If the student answers “Yes” to the question about veteran status, the CPS performs a match with VA records to confirm that status. The VA sends the result back, which appears as a match flag in the FAA Information section of the output document. For flags 2, 3, and 4, a comment and a C flag will appear on the SAR only if veteran status is the sole reason that the student would be independent. See the [2023-2024 SAR Comment Codes and Text Guide](#) on the Knowledge Center.

Successful match (match flag 1)

There won’t be any comments on the output document if the VA confirms that the student is a veteran.

Not a veteran (match flag 2)

A student will receive this flag if the VA database indicates he or she is not a veteran. If the student answered “Yes” to one of the other dependency questions, the student is independent based on that question and can receive student aid without resolving their veteran status.

If the student answered “No” to all the other dependency questions and he or she believes they are a qualifying veteran, the student should provide the financial aid office at his or her school a copy of their DD214 (the Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty, with “Character of Service” as anything but “dishonorable”). If it shows that the student is a veteran, he or she can receive aid as an independent student. A dependency override is not necessary because the CPS accepts the student's “Yes” answer to the veteran question. If a National Guardsman or a reservist who served on active duty (for other than training) did not receive a DD214 but can obtain a letter from a superior officer that documents the call-up to active duty and that classifies the character of service as anything but “dishonorable,” the student will be considered a veteran for FSA purposes. If the student turns out not to be a veteran, he or she will need to change his or her answer to the question from “Yes” to “No” and provide parent information, including a parent’s signature.

If the VA match problem is due to an error in the VA's database, the student should contact the VA and correct the error. A subsequent transaction will then redo the match with the VA.

Not in database (match flag 3)

Much of the guidance above applies for students not in the VA database: if the student is independent for a reason other than being a veteran, he or she doesn't need to resolve the problem before receiving student aid, although the student should have the VA correct its database if it's wrong. If the student answered "No" to the other dependency questions, he or she must either correct any problem with the VA, provide documentation showing he or she is a veteran or will be one by June 30, 2024, or, if he or she is not a veteran and will not be one by that date, provide parent data and change their response to the question from "Yes" to "No."

Active duty (match flag 4)

If the student is currently on active duty, he or she isn't a veteran yet, but if his or her active duty will end by June 30, 2024, he or she counts as a veteran for dependency status. Because the student should have answered "Yes" to the active duty question, he or she would be independent by that criterion and wouldn't have to resolve this situation.

- **Children and legal dependents (47 and 48).** Students who have legal dependents are independent. Legal dependents comprise children (including those who will be born before the end of the award year) of the student who receive more than half their support from the student, and other persons (except a spouse) who live with and receive more than half their support from the student as of the FAFSA signing date and will continue to do so for the award year. The same criteria apply to household size.

When a student applies after the award year has begun, to count a person who is not the student's child as a dependent, the support already given that year plus the future support must total more than 50 percent for the whole year. See Example 4 below.

If the student is receiving support to raise his or her child, is the child still considered a legal dependent?

If one or both student's parents are directly or indirectly providing more than 50% support in cash or other assistance to the child, then the student would answer "No" to the FAFSA question about legal dependents. "Indirect support" to the child includes support that a parent gives to the student on behalf of the child. If the student is living with a parent who is paying for most of the household expenses, the parent would usually be considered the primary source of support to the child, and the student would answer "No" to the question about legal dependents. However, there may be some cases where the student can demonstrate that he or she provides more than half of their child's support even while living at home, in which case he or she would answer "Yes" to the question about legal dependents.

When the student receives money for the child from any source other than his or her parents, the student may count it as part of his or her support to the child. Sources include child support and government programs, such as TANF and SNAP (formerly the federal Food Stamp Program), that provide benefits for dependent children. So, a student may be considered independent when the benefit he or she receives is the primary support for her child. For example, if a student who lives alone with her child receives cash from her boyfriend that amounts to more than 50% support for the child, then she would be able to count the child as a dependent and in her household size, and she would be independent. If the boyfriend is the father of the child and a student himself, then he would also be able to count the child as a dependent and in his household size, and he would be independent, too.

Legal dependent examples

Example 1: Stanislaw's uncle Yvor lives with him and receives a small disability payment each month. This

amount is paid directly to Yvor, so Stanislaw doesn't report it as income on the FAFSA form. The payment is small enough that Stanislaw is still providing more than half of Yvor's support, and because he expects to continue to provide more than half support during the award year, he includes Yvor as a dependent in his household size. However, Yvor expects to also start receiving a pension late next year. The combination of the pension and the disability payment will be enough that Stanislaw won't be providing more than half of his uncle's support and therefore won't be able to include Yvor in his household size after this award year.

Example 2: Laurel is going to college and is her cousin Paul's legal guardian. Paul receives Social Security benefits, but because he's a minor, the benefits are paid to Laurel on his behalf. These benefits provide more than half of Paul's support. Because Paul lives with Laurel and will be supported by her (through the Social Security benefits) throughout the award year, Laurel answers "Yes" to the legal dependent question. If Paul didn't live with Laurel, she would have to answer "No" to the question.

Example 3: Alan pays \$4,000 to support his girlfriend, Cathy, who lives with him. She has earned income of \$3,000, and she receives \$200 a month (\$2,400 a year) from her parents. She uses all of this for her support. Alan cannot consider Cathy a dependent since the \$4,000 he provides is not more than half of her total support of \$9,400.

Example 4: In April 2023, Anika applies for aid for both 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 award years. One month prior to that, her cousin Bettina came to live with her. Even though Anika provides all her cousin's support, the month of support she has given plus the two months left in the award year would not amount to more than 50% for 2022-2023, so she can't consider Bettina her dependent for that year. If Bettina had moved in before the midpoint of the year, Anika would have been able to count her as a dependent for 2022-2023. However, because the two plan to live together at least through June 2024, Anika can count Bettina as a dependent for 2023-2024.

- **Orphan, foster child, or ward of the court (49).** A student who was an **orphan**—both his or her parents were dead—when 13 or older is independent even if the student was subsequently adopted. Likewise, a student who was at any time since the age of 13 a **foster child** or a **ward of the court** is independent even if his or her status changed later.

A student is a ward of the court if it has assumed legal custody of the student. In some states the court may impose its authority over a juvenile who remains in the legal custody of his or her parents; such a student is not a ward of the court. Also, incarceration of a student does not qualify the student as a ward of the court. In some states the phrase "ward of the state" is used; if it is **not** due to incarceration, this is considered the same as a ward of the court for dependency status.

Documentation of foster youth (for Question 49)

If an institution requires that a student provide documentation that they were in foster care at age 13 or older, FAAs shall consider any of the following documentation to be adequate:

- submission of a court order or official State documentation that the student received Federal or State support in foster care;
- a documented phone call, written statement, or verifiable electronic data match from—
 - a State, county, or tribal agency administering a program under part B or E of title IV of the *Social Security Act* (42 U.S.C. 621 et seq. and 670 et seq.);
 - a State Medicaid agency; or
 - a public or private foster care placing agency or foster care facility or placement.
- a documented phone call or a written statement from an attorney, guardian ad litem, or Court Appointed Special Advocate;
- verification of the student's eligibility for an education and training voucher under the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program under section 477 of the *Social Security Act* (42 U.S.C. 677); or
- a documented phone call or written statement from a financial aid administrator who documented the

student's circumstance in the same or a prior award year.

- **Emancipation and legal guardianship (50 and 51).** Students are independent if they are, or were upon reaching the age of majority, emancipated minors (released from control of their parent or guardian) or in legal guardianship, both as adjudicated by a court of competent jurisdiction in their state of legal residence at the time of the adjudication. The emancipation must be determined by a court, not by an attorney, though the basis for it can vary by state.

Students placed in legal guardianship to their parents—e.g., if they are disabled adults and under their parents' care—are not independent for Title IV program purposes by this criterion and would answer "No" to Question 51.

Similarly, guardianship of a person's estate does not qualify as a legal guardianship for this purpose; the FAFSA form asks, "Does someone other than your parent or stepparent have legal guardianship of **you**"—i.e., the student, not his or her estate. So students would answer "No" to the question if another person has only been appointed guardian of their estate. They should also answer "No" and contact your school if custody was awarded by a court and the court papers say "custody" instead of "guardianship." Most states have a clear definition of legal guardianship that is distinct from custody, but if a given state does not, ask your school's legal counsel for help with this question.

- **Unaccompanied homeless youth (52-54).** A student is independent if at any time on or after July 1, 2022, the student is determined to be an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or is self-supporting and at risk of being homeless. In determining independence due to homelessness, FAAs shall consider documentation from the following entities—provided through a documented phone call, written statement, or verifiable electronic data match—to be adequate:
 - a local educational agency homeless liaison (or designee), as designated by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(1)(J)(ii));
 - the director (or designee) of an emergency or transitional shelter, street outreach program, homeless youth drop-in center, or other program serving individuals who are experiencing homelessness;
 - the director (or designee) of a Federal TRIO program or a Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate program (GEAR UP) grant; or
 - a financial aid administrator at another institution who documented the student's circumstance in the same or a prior award year.

In the absence of a determination by the entities above, an FAA must make a case-by-case determination of homeless youth status (see *Chapter 5*) based upon a written statement from, or a documented interview with, the student that confirms that they are an unaccompanied homeless youth, or unaccompanied, at risk of homelessness, and self-supporting.

Step Four: Parents' Information (Dependent Students Only)

Purpose: If the applicant answers "No" to questions 42-54, then he or she is dependent and must report parental information in Step 4 on the FAFSA form.

Questions 55-75 collect information about the student's parents and their household. Questions 76-89 collect tax and financial data for the parents, and because these questions are answered in the same way as for the student, they were discussed earlier.

In most cases it's clear who the parents are but not always.

Count: Biological, adoptive, and stepparents

A parent is a biological or adoptive parent or a person that the state has determined to be a parent (for example, when a state allows another person's name to be listed as a parent on a birth certificate). A stepparent is considered a parent if married to a biological or adoptive parent and if the student counts in their household size. Biological and adoptive parents who are unmarried and living together give that as their status in Question 55, and both report their information on the FAFSA form.

However, a stepparent who did not adopt the student cannot be the sole parent for determining dependency status. If the other parent dies, the student is still a dependent of the remaining biological parent, not the stepparent. If no biological parent remains, the student answers “Yes” to Question 49 and is independent.

Do not count: Foster parents, legal guardians, and relatives

A foster parent or a legal guardian is not treated as a parent for FSA purposes. If at any time since the age of 13 both student’s parents were dead (and he or she did not have an adoptive parent at that time) or the student was in foster care, he or she is independent. If the student is now, or was when he or she became an adult, an emancipated minor or in legal guardianship (see the exceptions under Question 51), the student is independent.

If a student is living with his or her grandparents or other relatives, their data should not be reported on the FAFSA form as parental data unless they have adopted the student. Any cash support from persons other than the student’s parents should be reported as untaxed income, as discussed in Step 2. The school may also consider other kinds of support as part of the student’s financial resources and use professional judgment to include the support under the item for student’s untaxed income (see *Chapter 5* on professional judgment).

- **Parents’ personal information (55-65).** The FAFSA form asks for parents’ marital status; the month and year they were married, remarried, separated, divorced, or widowed; SSN; last name; first initial; and date of birth. This data is used for the IRS DRT and helps the government estimate erroneous Pell payments. If the SSN, last name, and birth date for at least one parent are not given, or if neither parent’s SSN matches with the SSA, the application will be rejected. When the SSN doesn’t match, the wrong number must be corrected so that the application and SSA agree. For a name or birth date that doesn’t match, correct the application if it’s wrong or re-enter the information if it’s correct. If the parent doesn’t have an SSN, enter all zeros (000-00-0000) to prevent or remove a reject code. Do not use an individual taxpayer identification number as an SSN.
- **Parents’ state of residence (66-68).** Parents who do not live in the United States should enter “FC” for Question 66.
- **Household size (69).** This determines the standard living allowance that offsets family income in the EFC calculation. The following persons count in the household size of a dependent student’s parents:
 - **The student and parents**, even if the student is not living with them. Exclude a parent who has died or is not living in the household because of separation or divorce but include a parent who is on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces apart from the family.
 - **The student’s siblings and children**, if they will receive more than half their support from the student’s parent(s) from July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024. Siblings need not live in the home. This includes unborn children and siblings of the student who will receive more than half support from the student’s parent(s) from birth to the end of the award year. It also includes siblings who would be considered dependent based on the FAFSA dependency questions (i.e., they need not be students nor apply for aid).
For children in the household size, the “support test” is used rather than residency because there may be situations in which a parent supports a child who does not live with him or her, such as when the parent is divorced or separated. If the parent receives benefits (such as Social Security payments) in the child’s name, these benefits must be counted as parental support for the child.
 - **Other persons** who live with and receive more than half their support from the student’s parent(s) and will receive more than half support for the entire award year. When the application is submitted after the start of the year, see the relevant paragraph and example about legal dependents provided earlier in this chapter under the “Children and legal dependents” section.

Foster children in household size: Typically, foster children do not count in the household size as their costs are covered by foster care payments. However, children in “kinship foster care” for whom no benefits are provided can count in the household size if they meet the tests for other persons, i.e., if they live with and receive more than half their support from their foster parents for the award year.

Note that the rules that decide whether someone is counted in the household for FSA purposes aren’t identical to the IRS rules for determining dependents or household members.

Example: Lydia is a dependent student, and her parents are married. Her brother Ron is 26, but his parents still provide more than 50% of his support, so he is included in the household size. Her sister Elizabeth is attending college but is an independent student and isn't supported by their parents, so she isn't included in the household size. Her sister Susan is not attending college but is working and supporting herself. However, if Susan were to apply for student aid, she would be considered a dependent student, so she is included. Therefore, the household size that Lydia reports for her parents is five.

Reporting information in cases of death, separation, divorce, and remarriage

Death of a parent: If one, but not both, of the student's parents has died, the student answers the parental questions about the surviving biological or adoptive parent and does not report any financial information for the deceased parent. If both parents are dead when the student completes the FAFSA form, he or she must answer "Yes" to Question 49, making him or her independent. Remember that an adoptive parent counts as a parent, but a legal guardian does not. If the surviving parent dies after the FAFSA form has been filed, the student must update his or her dependency status and report income and assets as an independent student.

Stepparent: A stepparent is treated like a biological parent if the stepparent has legally adopted the student or if the stepparent is married, as of the date of application, to a student's biological or adoptive parent whose information will be reported on the FAFSA form. **There are no exceptions.** A prenuptial agreement does not exempt the stepparent from providing information required of a parent on the FAFSA application. The stepparent's income information for the entire base year, 2021, must be reported even if the parent and stepparent were not married until after 2021. See above for how to fill out the parent questions when the stepparent's spouse (the biological parent) dies; if the stepparent has not adopted the student, he or she would no longer provide parental information as before, but any financial support they give to the student would be counted as untaxed income.

Divorce of the student's parents: If the student's parents are divorced, he or she should report the information of the parent with whom they lived with longer during the 12 months prior to the date he or she completes the application. If the student lived equally with each parent or did not live with either one, then he or she should provide the information for the parent from whom he or she received more financial support or the one from whom he or she received more support the last calendar year for which it was given. Note that it is not typical that a student will live with or receive support from both parents exactly equally. Usually, you can determine that the student lived with one of the parents more than half the year or that he or she received more than half support from one of the parents.

Example: Marta is 22 and doesn't meet any of the independence criteria. Her parents divorced recently, and she has not lived with them since she was 18. Also, neither parent provided support in the past year. The last time she received support from her parents was when she lived with them and they were still married. Because her father's income was larger and he contributed more money to the overall household expenses, Marta determines that the last time she received support, most of it was from her father. She provides his data on the FAFSA form.

If biological or adoptive parents who are divorced still live together, their status is unmarried and living together and both would report their information on the FAFSA form; see "Who does and does not count as a parent on the FAFSA form" section earlier in this chapter for more information. If one or both have married someone else and all live in the same household (and presumably the student lived with both parents an equal amount of time), the parent and stepparent, if applicable, who provided more support in the previous year would include their information on the FAFSA form. Schools may use PJ to account for the other parent's financial contribution that is not already properly counted as child support on line 89c or money received on line 41i of the 2023–2024 FAFSA form.

Separation of the student's parents or the student and spouse: A couple need not be legally separated to be considered separated—they may deem themselves informally separated when one of the partners has left the household

for an indefinite period and the marriage is severed. For a dependent student, use the rules for divorce to determine which parent's information to report. While a married couple that lives together can't be informally separated, in some states they can be legally separated. If their state allows this, and if they are still living together and are legally separated, then that is their status on the FAFSA form unless they are the parents of a dependent student, in which case their status is unmarried and living together and both would report their information.

Common-law marriage: If a couple lives together and has not been formally married but meets the criteria in their state for a common-law marriage, they should be reported as married on the FAFSA form. If the state doesn't consider their situation to be a common-law marriage, then they aren't married; parents of a dependent student would report that they are unmarried and living together. Check with the appropriate state agency concerning the definition of a common-law marriage.

- **Number in college (70).** The applicant **always** counts in the number in college, but parents do not. Others included in the household size are also included in the number in college if they are or will be enrolled at least half time during the award year in any eligible degree or certificate program at a school eligible for any of the FSA programs. The definition of half-time enrollment for this question must meet the federal requirements even if the school defines half time differently. (See *Volume 1: Student Eligibility* for enrollment status requirements.)

Service academies, household size, and number in college

Students at U.S. service academies have most of their educational expenses paid for by the federal government. Because of this, their families cannot “reasonably be expected to contribute to their postsecondary education” and they are not counted in the number in college in the families of either dependent or independent students. Since they will not receive more than one-half of their support from any person, they also do not count in the household size of any independent students and some dependent students. However, if a service academy attendee is a sibling of a dependent student and can answer “No” to all the dependency status questions, he or she would count in the household size of that dependent student. [HEA Sec. 474(b)(3); 480(k), (l)]

Number in college

HEA Sec. 474(b)(3)

- **Receipt of means-tested federal benefits by anyone in the household (71-75).** This as an alternative for the tax return requirement of the simplified needs and automatic zero EFC tests.
- **Tax forms filed by parents, filing status, income, and assets (76-79, 81-89).** Refer to the earlier discussion for these questions.
- **Dislocated worker (80).** This status, as defined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act or WIOA, is an alternative to the tax return and means-tested federal benefits criteria for determining if a person qualifies for the simplified needs test or automatic zero EFC. A person would answer “Yes” to this question if he or she meets the statutory definition of dislocated worker. Under the WIOA, a dislocated worker is someone who falls into at least one of these categories:
 - A person who meets **all** the following requirements:
 - He or she was terminated or laid off from employment or received a notice of termination or layoff.
 - He or she is eligible for or has exhausted his or her unemployment compensation, **or** he or she is not eligible for it because, even though he or she has been employed long enough to demonstrate attachment to the workforce, he or she had insufficient earnings or performed services for an employer that weren't covered under a state's unemployment compensation law.
 - He or she is unlikely to return to a previous industry or occupation.
 - A person who was terminated or laid off from employment or received a notice of termination or layoff because of any permanent closure of, or any substantial layoff at, a plant, facility, or enterprise
 - A person who is employed at a facility at which the employer made a general announcement that it will close within 180 days

- A person who is employed at a facility at which the employer made a general announcement that it will close
- A self-employed person (including farmers, ranchers, or fishers) who is unemployed because of natural disasters or because of general economic conditions in his or her community
- A spouse of an active-duty member of the Armed Forces who has experienced a loss of employment because of relocating due to permanent change in duty station
- A spouse of an active-duty member of the Armed Forces who is unemployed or underemployed and is having trouble in obtaining or upgrading employment
- Displaced homemakers who meet **all** the following criteria:
 - They have been providing unpaid services to family members in the home.
 - They have been dependent on the income of another family member but are no longer supported by that income.
 - They are unemployed or underemployed and having trouble getting or upgrading employment. An underemployed person is one working part time but who wants to work full time or is working below the demonstrated level of his or her education or job skills.

Not everyone who receives unemployment benefits will meet the definition of dislocated worker. For example, those who quit their jobs are generally not considered dislocated workers, even if they are receiving unemployment benefits.

You are not required to verify the answer to this question. If you choose to verify it, documentation can include a letter or a layoff or termination notice from the employer, unemployment insurance (UI) system verification, tax returns, a business license, or newspaper articles. You may also use documents from the state workforce agency or a “one-stop career center,” though they are not required to provide you such documentation and a person may meet the dislocated worker definition without going to the workforce investment system for services. Absent all other evidence, self-certification, such as a statement signed by the person affirming that he or she meets the definition of dislocated worker, is sufficient.

Information from the workforce investment system. The local workforce investment system and state UI agency may support financial aid administrators by:

- providing general information to dislocated workers;
- providing general information to financial aid administrators, such as the WIOA definition of dislocated workers and appropriate samples of documentation that financial aid offices can request from an individual to verify dislocated worker status;
- providing specific information to dislocated workers. A person can request documentation from the career center or other appropriate office that he or she is receiving dislocated worker services through the workforce investment system. That office can give the documentation to the student, or at his or her request it may (but is not obligated to) give the documentation directly to the college.

If you must determine if someone is a dislocated worker, you have sole responsibility and must make the determination regardless of whether the person has proof of dislocated worker status—or is receiving dislocated worker services—from the workforce investment system.

Note that a response of “Don’t know” on the FAFSA form is treated as “No” by the CPS. If a person gives this response to Question 80 or 97, you are not required to verify it, but you may want to determine if he or she is a dislocated worker and if that would affect the student’s eligibility for federal aid.

Step Five: Independent Student Data

Purpose: Questions 90–97 collect information about independent students. Only students who answered “Yes” to one or more questions in Step Three complete this step.

- **Student’s household size (90).** The following persons are included in the household size of an independent student:
 - **The student and his or her spouse** unless the spouse has died or is not living in the household due to separation or divorce.
 - **The student’s children**, regardless of where they live, if they will receive more than half of their support from the student (and spouse) from July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024. This includes the student’s unborn children

who will be born during the award year and will receive more than half their support from the student from birth to the end of the award year.

- **Other persons** who live with and receive more than half their support from the student and will receive more than half support for the entire award year. For FAFSA forms submitted after the start of the year, see the relevant paragraph and example about legal dependents provided earlier in this chapter under the “Children and legal dependents” section.

Example: Eddy is an independent student. He was married, but now he and his wife have separated. He’s paying child support, but it isn’t enough to provide more than half his children’s support, so he can’t include his children in his household size. Eddy’s nephew Chavo lives with him and gets more than half of his support from Eddy (and will do so for the award year), so he can be counted in Eddy’s household size, which is two. Having just turned 24, Chavo is also considered independent on his own FAFSA form, and his household size is one.

- **Number in college (91).** The student is **always** included in the number in college. Also included are those in the household size who are or will be enrolled at least half time during the award year in a degree or certificate program at a Title IV-eligible school and who can reasonably be expected to receive aid from the family for their education. The definition of half-time enrollment for this question must meet the federal requirements even if the school defines half time differently.

Example: Under the previous example, Eddy would report two in the household and two in college, while Chavo would report one in his household and one in college.

- **Receipt of means-tested federal benefits by anyone in the household (92-96).** This is an alternative for the tax return requirement of the simplified needs and automatic zero EFC tests.
- **Dislocated worker (97).** See the explanation of Question 803 discussed earlier under Step Four.

Step Six: School Information

Purpose: Question 98 collects information about which colleges the student wants to receive his or her FAFSA information. For a college to be able to receive the student's data, the student must list the college’s federal school code (not the OPE ID) or enter its complete name, address, city, and state. There is a federal school code search in the online FAFSA form, and the entire list of school codes is available in Excel on the [Knowledge Center website](#) Library section’s “Publications by Resource Type” area.

For each school the student indicates whether he or she expects to live on or off campus or with his or her parents. This information is not used to calculate the EFC, but it is useful to schools for determining the cost of attendance.

The student can list up to four schools on the PDF FAFSA form and 10 on the web (at least one is required). If he or she wants their information to be available to more schools, he or she can change the schools listed online or use their SAR. The CPS will send data to no more than 10 (four with the PDF FAFSA form) schools at a time. *Chapter 4* explains how students can add or change schools.

The ISIR will only display the federal school code and corresponding housing code of the receiving school. The information of other schools the student included on the FAFSA form will not appear except on the SAR and on ISIRs sent to state grant agencies. See The [ISIR Guide](#).

Step Seven: Signature(s)

Purpose: By signing the FAFSA form, the applicant is assuming responsibility for the accuracy of the information reported.

- **Date and signature(s) (99-100).** In addition to certifying that the data on the FAFSA form is correct, the student is also signing a statement of educational purpose, which is required to receive FSA funds. Among other things, the student agrees to spend FSA funds only on educational expenses and affirms that he or she is not in default on a federal loan or does not owe a grant overpayment. If the student is dependent, one parent whose information is reported on the FAFSA form must also sign.

Substitutes for a parent's signature. While parent information must be provided for a dependent student, a high school counselor or a college aid administrator may sign the application in place of a parent if:

- the parents are not currently in the United States and cannot be contacted by normal means,
- the current address of the parents is not known, or
- the parents have been determined physically or mentally incapable of providing a signature.

The signer must provide his or her title in parentheses next to his or her signature and briefly state the reason (only one is needed) why he or she is signing for the parents; **if this is not done, the FAFSA form will not be processed.** The signer assures a minimum level of credibility in the data submitted; however, he or she does not assume any responsibility or liability in this process. If the counselor or FAA finds any inaccuracies in the information reported, they should direct the student to send the SAR through the normal correction process or, if he or she is an FAA, they can submit corrections through FAA Access to CPS Online. Because this proxy signing isn't possible electronically, it must be done on a paper FAFSA or on the signature page/FAFSA summary used with FAA Access.

- **Preparer's ID and signature (101-103).** Only persons who are paid a fee to help the student complete the application are considered FAFSA preparers. Those who advise students without charging a fee, such as high school counselors and FAAs, are not preparers. A preparer must include his or her name, his or her company's name (if applicable), his or her address or the company address, and either his or her SSN or the company employer identification number (EIN, as assigned by the IRS). With the paper FAFSA form, the preparer must also sign and date the form.

Preparers have other obligations. In their advertising and initial contact with a consumer, including via the Internet or phone, they must clearly inform him or her that the FAFSA form is free and can be completed electronically or on paper without professional help. If they have a website for their service, it must link to FAFSA on the Web. They may not use any form other than the FAFSA form to apply for Title IV aid.

A preparer who knowingly falsifies information on the application is subject to the same penalties as an applicant.

Copies of signed documents

While you will often receive documents with original or "wet" signatures from the student (e.g., a paper FAFSA form that the student has worked on and signed while in your office), there might be an occasion where the student gives you a copy or sends you a fax of a signed document. Except for a copied FAFSA form, other imaged versions of the original signed document are valid and may be retained.

Assistance in preparation of the FAFSA

HEA Sec. 483(d)

Signatures for electronic applications

FAA Access to CPS Online

If you enter a student's original application through FAA Access to CPS Online, you must obtain original or "wet" signatures on the printed signature page/FAFSA summary or on a completed paper FAFSA form, and you must keep the signed document in the school files even if the student does not receive federal student aid or attend your school. You may electronically store the original document, but you may not accept faxed or copied signatures from the student for the FAFSA form. (You have more latitude regarding verification documents and changes to the application; see **Chapter**

FAFSA online

Students who have an FSA ID can electronically sign their FAFSA form. Parents who have an FSA ID can also electronically sign. When all the necessary signatures are provided electronically, the application will be processed within 72 hours.

Alternately, students can print the signature page, sign it, and mail it to the processor. If the processor doesn't receive the signature page within 14 calendar days of receiving the application data, it will mail a "reject 16" (missing student signature) SAR to the student, which the student can sign and return. If the student chooses not to print and send a signature page, or if no printer was available, the processor won't wait 14 days to print a rejected SAR for the student but will generate one within 72 hours of receiving the data. See the announcement of March 18, 2019, for a [list of what are valid and invalid signatures](#).

If the student indicated on an electronic FAFSA form that he or she would print, sign, and mail in a signature page but the processor has not received the signature page, the student can call the FSAIC and have their record released from the FAFSA hold file. Because no signature page has been received, the FAFSA processor will produce a rejected SAR and mail it to the student to sign and return. The processor will accept the first signature document it receives—either the signed signature page or the signed SAR.

Schools and states receive ISIRs for rejected records. A student's reject 16 SAR and his or her ISIR will reflect the data that he or she provided on the application; however, the CPS won't calculate an official EFC for the student (an unofficial EFC that cannot be used to award or disburse aid will appear on the ISIR) or do any database matches until it receives a signed signature page, a signed SAR, or an electronic signature. A school can also collect the required "wet" signatures at the school, either on the SAR or a document that has the required certification statements (FAA Access allows schools to print out a signature page for the ISIR). The school can then submit an electronic correction showing that the signatures have been provided.

When a parent of a dependent student doesn't sign with his or her own FSA ID, the student can print a signature page for the parent. If the student indicates that no printer was available, the CPS will generate a "reject 15" (missing parent signature) output document for the student within 72 hours. If the student indicated he or she would send in a signature page, the processor will wait up to 14 calendar days to receive the signed page. If it doesn't receive a signed signature page after 14 days, it will generate a reject 15 SAR and send it to the student. The student must have a parent sign the SAR and must send it back to the address on the SAR. For reject 15 records, a student's SAR and ISIR will reflect the data provided on the application, but the processor won't calculate an EFC for the student until it receives the parent's electronic signature or the signed SAR or signature page.

Signature requirements for changes made after the FAFSA form is filed will be discussed in *Chapter 4*.

Signature Requirements: Application and Verification for All FSA Programs

	Application (FAFSA online, PDF FAFSA, FAA Access to CPS Online)	IRS Documentation (Transcript or other form submitted for verification)	Verification Document
Student	Must sign statement that data are accurate and other conditions are met (on paper FAFSA, web summary, or signature page or by using the FSA ID)	IRS Data Retrieval Tool (DRT) or tax return transcript (which does not need to be signed). In rare instances when the tax return is used, it must be signed by the student (or spouse), or the tax preparer must provide his or her name and SSN, EIN, or PTIN.	Must sign documents used to verify FAFSA data
Parent(s) (if student is dependent)	One parent must sign statement that data are accurate (on paper FAFSA,	DRT or tax return transcript (which does not need to be signed). In rare instances when the tax return is used, it must be signed by one parent, or the tax	One parent must sign documents

	web summary, or signature page or by using the FSA ID)	preparer must provide his or her name and SSN, EIN, or PTIN.	used to verify FAFSA data.
Aid Administrator	Must certify if overriding dependency status or using PJ (can't be done in the FAFSA online)	N/A	N/A

*Signature Requirements for Changes**

	Changes via SAR or Corrections on the Web	Changes submitted via FAA Access	Professional Judgment via FAA Access
Student	Must sign corrections statement on the SAR; on the web the FSA ID serves as the student's signature.	N/A	N/A
Parent(s) (if student is dependent)	If parent data are changed, one parent must sign with FSA ID on the web, sign the corrections statement on the SAR, or print and sign the signature page.	N/A	N/A
Aid Administrator	N/A	School must have signed documentation from student and parent	Must certify for PJ/FAA adjustments or dependency override

*These requirements apply to any submission of changes to the CPS, whether required by regulation (for Pell Grant recipients or corrections to data match items) or at the discretion of the financial aid administrator (for Campus-Based aid and Direct Loans). See "Submitting changes via FAA Access to CPS Online or EDE" in Chapter 4 for a fuller explanation of what is required when submitting changes to the CPS.

Chapter 3

Expected Family Contribution (EFC)

The EFC is a measure of how much the student and his or her family can be expected to contribute to the cost of the student's education for a given award year. It impacts a student's eligibility for certain types of federal student aid. The EFC is calculated according to a formula specified in the law and explained in detail in this chapter.

General Information

The Central Processing System (CPS) uses data provided by the applicant on the FAFSA form to calculate the EFC. The EFC formula uses income, assets, the number of persons in the household, and the number of those attending college for the award year.

Tables used in the computation of the EFC is updated annually and published on the [Knowledge Center](#) in a *Federal Register*. Also updated each year is the Department's [EFC Formula Guide](#) which is available at fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center in the Library section under Resource Type > Handbooks, Manuals, or Guides > 2023-2024 Expected Family Contribution (EFC) Formula Guide.

The law (see HEA Sec. 474-479) gives three regular EFC formulas:

1. Formula A – Dependent students,
2. Formula B – Independent students *without* dependents other than a spouse, and
3. Formula C – Independent students *with* dependents other than a spouse

There are two variants of the regular EFC calculation:

1. A simplified formula with fewer data elements for each group above, and
2. An automatic zero EFC for Formula A and C students.

Simplified Formula

The simplified formula is basically the same as the regular formula except that asset information isn't considered in the calculation.

A **dependent** student qualifies for the simplified calculation if both (1) and (2) below are true:

1. The student's parents did not file Schedule 1 with their IRS Form 1040

OR

The student's parent is a dislocated worker, as defined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (see *Chapter 2* for a description of dislocated worker)

OR

Anyone counted in parents' household size (as defined on the FAFSA form and in *Chapter 2*) received a means-tested federal benefit during 2021 or 2022.

AND

2. The parents' combined 2021 adjusted gross income (AGI, for tax filers) or income earned from work (for non-filers) was less than \$50,000.

An **independent** student qualifies for the simplified calculation if (1) and (2) below are true:

1. The student and spouse did not file Schedule 1 with their IRS Form 1040

OR

One of them is a dislocated worker as defined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (see *Chapter 2* for a description of dislocated worker)

OR

Anyone counted in the household size (as defined on the FAFSA form and in *Chapter 2*) received a means-tested federal benefit in 2021 or 2022.

AND

2. The student's and spouse's combined 2021 AGI (tax filers) or income earned from work (non-filers) *was less than \$50,000*.

Schedule 1 Filing Exceptions

Individuals who filed a Schedule 1 only to report one unemployment compensation, educator expenses, IRA deductions, student loan interest deduction or Alaska Permanent Fund dividends should be considered individuals who did not file Schedule 1 for purposes of qualifying for the simplified need formula.

Individuals who were not required to file a 1040 return and those who filed a return for Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, or Palau should be considered individuals who did not file Schedule 1 for purposes of qualifying for the simplified need formula.

Means-Tested Federal Benefits Programs

The means-tested federal benefit programs are:

- Medicaid (including the Children's Health Insurance Program) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, also known as food stamps
- The Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch Program
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) – may use a different name in different states
- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

A person need not have received the benefit for an entire year; receiving it at any time in the base or following year qualifies. Also, an FAA may use professional judgment (PJ) to count a benefit if a person did not receive it during those 24 months but is receiving it now.

The FAFSA website has a threshold question that allows the applicant to skip asset questions when the applicant seems eligible for the simplified formula or an automatic zero EFC. But in some instances, such as when using a paper FAFSA form, a student who qualifies for the simplified formula will provide asset information. In those cases, the CPS will calculate two EFCs: one using the assets and one excluding them. The EFC from the simplified formula (which excludes assets) is called the primary EFC and is printed on the front of the student's SAR, while the EFC from the full calculation is called the secondary EFC and is printed in the FAA Information section. To determine the student's federal aid, the school must use the primary EFC, which will always be less than or equal to the secondary EFC. If it turns out that the student was not eligible for the simplified formula and did not provide asset information, the school must correct and submit the record and use the EFC reported on the resulting transaction.

Automatic Zero EFC

The law also provides for an automatic zero EFC for some students. The rules for determining who qualifies for this variant are the same as those for the simplified formula with these differences:

- The income threshold is \$29,000 or less instead of less than \$50,000.
- The automatic zero EFC is not available to independent students without dependents other than a spouse (those who use Formula B).

Skip logic in the online FAFSA form will allow these students to answer fewer questions, and if they are selected for verification, fewer items are required.

Automatic Zero EFC

HEA Sec. 479(c)

Alternate EFCs

The EFC found in the upper right corner of the first page of the output document is based on a nine-month enrollment period and should always be used for awarding a Pell Grant, even if the student is attending for a longer or shorter period. The law specifies how the EFC of a dependent student is modified if the student enrolls for a period other than a nine months. The second section of the FAA information area has a table of alternate primary and secondary EFCs for 1-12 months that you must use to award aid (other than Pell grants) to students attending for other than nine months.

The EFC Worksheets

To further assist schools with the EFC calculation process, the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#) contains EFC worksheets and tables for each formula (A, B and C), which can be used to manually calculate an EFC or to see how the EFC is determined for each of the formulas. For items taken from the FAFSA form, the worksheets indicate the corresponding FAFSA/SAR line numbers. On the worksheets for the simplified formula, the parts of the calculation that aren't used are grayed out.

The following information provides additional insight into the EFC calculation process and may prove helpful when reviewing the EFC worksheets in the EFC Formula Guide.

Negative AGI or zero?

The FAFSA form asks for the AGI (that appears on the tax return), which can be a negative number. If you are doing a hand calculation of the EFC, you'll notice that the first line of the worksheet for Formula A cites the FAFSA line number and instructs you to substitute a zero if the AGI is negative. This does not mean that the student or parent should report a negative AGI as a zero on the FAFSA form. The CPS will change the value to zero, and it makes assumptions that you will not make when completing an EFC worksheet by hand. When filling out the FAFSA form, the applicant should use the AGI as it appears on the tax return, even if it is a negative number.

Formula A—Dependent Students

The EFC for a dependent student is calculated using the FAFSA data for the student and his or her parents. The CPS calculates the parents' contribution (which includes their assets), the student's contribution from income, and the student's contribution from assets; the EFC is the sum of these three.

Under the simplified formula, the parents' contribution doesn't include assets, nor is the student's contribution from assets counted.

Parents' contribution

The parents' available income and contribution from assets are first determined, and then these are used with the number in college to calculate the parents' contribution.

Parents' available income. The parents' available income is calculated by subtracting certain allowances from the parents' total income. These allowances account for certain nondiscretionary expenses, such as taxes and basic living expenses. Once a minimum level of support has been offset for those expenses, the formula assumes that the remaining income is available for discretionary purposes, including paying for a postsecondary education. The available income can be a negative number.

The total income is the sum of the taxable and untaxed income, minus amounts reported in the income but excluded from the formula. If the parents are tax filers, the parents' AGI as reported on the FAFSA form is the amount of the parents' taxable income used in the calculation. If the parents are not tax filers, the calculation uses the parents' reported income earned from work. Total income can be a negative number.

The sum of the following allowances reduces the parents' total income:

- **U.S. income tax paid.** Use the amount reported on the FAFSA form. Non-tax filers don't receive this allowance. If this is a negative amount, it is set to zero.
- **State and other tax allowance.** Use *Table 1: State and Other Tax Allowance* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). This allowance is a percentage of parents' total income and approximates the average amount paid in state and other taxes. The percentage varies according to the state and according to whether the parents' total income is below \$15,000 or is \$15,000 or more. The state used is the parents' state of legal residence reported on the FAFSA form. If this item is blank or invalid, the student's reported state of legal residence is used. If both are blank or invalid, the state in the student's mailing address is used. If all three are blank or invalid, the "Other" rate shown in Table 1 for a blank or invalid state is used (2% for total income below \$15,000; 1% for total income of \$15,000 or more). If the allowance is a negative amount, it's set to zero.
- **Parents' Social Security tax allowance.** Use *Table 3: Social Security Tax* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). Apply the rates shown in the table separately to each parent's income earned from work in 2021 (as reported on the FAFSA form). The total allowance for Social Security taxes is never less than zero.
- **Income protection allowance.** Use *Table 4: Parents' Income Protection Allowance* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). This allowance is for the basic living expenses of a family. It varies according to the number in the parents' household and the number in college in 2023-2024, as reported on the FAFSA form. In general, a school can assume that 30% of the income protection allowance amount is for food, 22% for housing, 9% for transportation expenses, 16% for clothing and personal care, 11% for medical care, and 12% for other family consumption. The income protection allowance used for a particular student is provided as one of the intermediate values in the FAA Information Section of the output document (labeled as "IPA").
- **Employment expense allowance.** Families with two working parents and one-parent families have extra expenses that must be considered, such as housekeeping services, transportation, clothing and upkeep, and meals away from home. This allowance recognizes those extra expenses. For two working parents, the allowance is 35% of the lesser of the first or second parent's income earned from work (questions 83 and 84) but may not exceed \$4,700. For one-parent families, the allowance is 35% of the parent's income earned from work, also not to exceed \$4,700. If a student's parents are married and only one parent reports an income earned from work, the allowance is zero. The employment expense allowance is never less than zero.

Parents' contribution from assets. The full formula uses the assets of parents of a dependent student and determines a "contribution from assets." This amount is combined with available income to give an accurate picture of the family's financial strength. In the simplified formula assets aren't counted.

First, the parents' **net worth** is calculated by adding assets reported on the FAFSA form. The net worth of a business or a farm is adjusted to protect a portion of these assets. Use *Table 6: Business/Farm Net Worth Adjustment* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#) to calculate the amount to be used.

Second, the parents' **discretionary net worth** is calculated by subtracting the education savings and asset protection allowance (*Table 7: Education Savings and Asset Protection Allowance* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#)) from the parents' net worth. Discretionary net worth may be less than zero.

Finally, the discretionary net worth is multiplied by the conversion rate of 12% to get the **parents' contribution from assets**, which represents the portion of parental assets considered available to help pay for the student's college education. If the contribution from assets is negative, it is set to zero.

Calculation of parents' contribution. This is the final step in determining the parents' contribution. The parents' available income and contribution from assets are added together to determine the parents' adjusted available income, which can be a negative number. The total parents' contribution from adjusted available income is calculated from the amounts and rates in *Table 8: Contribution from AAI* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#) and is the total amount parents are expected to contribute toward all of their family's postsecondary educational costs. The rates in *Table 8* increase from 22% to 47% as the adjusted available income increases. This is based on the principle that as income increases beyond the amount needed to maintain a basic standard of living, the portion used for family maintenance decreases and the portion available for discretionary purposes increases. Therefore, a progressively larger amount of income may be contributed toward postsecondary educational costs. If the total parents' contribution from adjusted available income is negative, it is set to zero.

The parents' contribution for the individual student is then calculated by dividing the total parents' contribution from adjusted available income by the number in college in 2023-2024, as reported on the FAFSA form. Parents are not included in the number attending college.

Student's contribution from income

To determine the student's contribution from income, the student's available income (AI) is first calculated by subtracting total allowances from the student's total income. The AI is then assessed at a rate of 50% to obtain the student contribution from available income. If the student contribution from available income is less than zero, it's set to zero.

As with the parents' income information, the student's total income is calculated using information from his or her FAFSA form. The student's total income is the sum of their taxable and untaxed income, minus amounts reported in the income but excluded from the formula (see *Chapter 2* for more on these exclusions). If the student is a tax filer, his or her AGI as reported on the FAFSA form is the amount of taxable income used in the calculation. If the student is not a tax filer, the calculation uses his or her reported income earned from work. The total income may be a negative number.

The allowances are calculated by adding the following:

- **U.S. income tax paid.** Use the amount reported on the FAFSA form. Non-tax filers don't receive this allowance. If this is a negative amount, it's set to zero.
- **State and other tax allowance.** Use *Table 2: State and Other Tax Allowance* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). This allowance is a percentage of the student's total income that varies according to the state. The state to be used is the student's state of legal residence reported on the FAFSA form. If that item is blank or invalid, the state in the student's mailing address is used. If both items are blank or invalid, the parents' state of legal residence is used. If all three items are blank or invalid, the "Other" rate for a blank or invalid state in *Table 2* is used (1%). If the allowance is a negative amount, it's set to zero.
- **Social Security tax allowance.** Use *Table 3: Social Security Tax* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). The student's Social Security taxes are calculated by applying the rates to the student's income earned from work in 2021 (as reported on the FAFSA form). The total allowance for Social Security taxes is never less than zero.
- **Income protection allowance.** The income protection allowance for a dependent student is \$7,600.
- **Parent's negative AAI.** To recognize that a student's income may be needed to help support the family, the EFC calculation allows a parent's negative adjusted available income (AAI) to reduce a dependent student's contribution from income. Because the student's contribution from income cannot be negative, this will not affect the student's contribution from assets.

Student's contribution from assets

The student's assets are treated the same way as the parents' assets with three differences:

- There is no adjustment to the net worth of a business or farm.
- There is no education savings and asset protection allowance.
- Net worth is assessed at the rate of 20%.

Remember that under the simplified formula there is no student contribution from assets.

The student's net worth is calculated by adding assets reported on the FAFSA form (negative amounts are converted to zero for this calculation). The net worth is multiplied by 20% to obtain the student's contribution from assets, which is the portion of assets considered available to help pay for his or her postsecondary education.

Calculation of student's EFC

The student's EFC is determined by adding the parents' contribution, the student's contribution from available income, and his or her contribution from assets. If the student qualified for the simplified formula, his or her contribution from assets is not counted, and the parents' contribution is determined without using their assets.

Alternate EFCs for other than nine-month enrollment

The standard parents' contribution is for a nine-month enrollment period. For a shorter period, the parents' contribution is prorated according to the number of months of enrollment. The student's contribution from available income is also prorated and then added to the student asset contribution, which is not prorated. For an enrollment other than nine months, the parents' contribution is calculated by adjusting the standard nine-month formula on page 3 of *Worksheet A* of the EFC worksheets in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#), and the student's contribution remains at the nine-month amount.

Formula B—Independent Student Without Dependents Other Than A Spouse

The EFC for an independent student without dependents other than a spouse is calculated using FAFSA data for the student and spouse. The CPS calculates a contribution from available income and a contribution from assets. The sum of these two is divided by the number in college in 2023-2024, as reported on the FAFSA form. The result is the EFC for the 2023-2024 award year. Under the simplified formula, the contribution from assets is not used.

Contribution from available income

The student's available income, which can be a negative number, is calculated by subtracting the total allowances from the total income. These allowances account for certain nondiscretionary expenses, such as taxes and basic living expenses. Once a minimum level of support has been provided to meet those expenses, the formula assumes that the remaining income is available for discretionary purposes, including paying for a postsecondary education. The available income is then assessed at a rate of 50% to obtain the student's contribution from available income.

Total income. The total income is the sum of the student's and their spouse's (if the student is married) taxable and untaxed income, minus amounts reported in the income on the FAFSA form but excluded from the formula (see *Chapter 2* for more on these exclusions). If the student and spouse are tax filers, their AGI as reported on the FAFSA form is the amount of taxable income used in the calculation. If they are not tax filers, the calculation uses reported income earned from work. Untaxed income is included in the formula because it may have a considerable effect on the family's financial strength and, in some cases, may be the family's main source of income. The total income can be a negative number.

Allowances against income. Total allowances are calculated by adding:

- **U.S. income tax paid.** Use the amount reported on the FAFSA form. Non-tax filers don't receive this allowance. If this is a negative amount, it's set to zero.
- **State and other tax allowance.** Use *Table 2: State and Other Tax Allowance* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). This allowance is a percentage of the student and spouse's total income. The percentage varies according to the state. The state to be used is the student's state of legal residence reported on the FAFSA form. If that item is blank or invalid, the state in the student's mailing address is used. If both items are blank or invalid, the "Other" rate for a blank or invalid state is used (1%). If the allowance is a negative amount, it's set to zero.
- **Social Security tax allowance.** Use *Table 3: Social Security Tax* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). Apply the rates shown in the table separately to the student's and spouse's income earned from work in 2021 (as reported on the FAFSA form). The total allowance for Social Security taxes is never less than zero.

- **Income protection allowance.** The income protection allowance is \$11,820 for single students and for married students whose spouse is enrolled at least half time. The allowance is \$18,960 for married students whose spouse isn't enrolled at least half time.
- **Employment expense allowance.** Families with two working spouses have extra expenses that must be considered, such as housekeeping services, transportation, clothing and upkeep, and meals away from home. This allowance recognizes those extra expenses. If the student isn't married or is separated, the employment expense allowance is zero. If the student is married but only one person is working (either the student or the student's spouse), the allowance is zero. If both the student and his or her spouse are working, the allowance is 35% of the lesser of the student's income earned from work (Question 35) or the spouse's income earned from work (Question 36), but it may not exceed \$4,700.

Contribution from assets

For students who qualify for the simplified formula, there is no contribution from assets. In the full formula, the assets of an independent student with no dependents other than a spouse are considered in order to fully measure the family's ability to contribute toward postsecondary educational costs.

First, the **net worth** of the student and spouse's assets is calculated by adding assets reported on the FAFSA form. The net worth of a business or a farm is adjusted to protect a portion of the net worth of these assets. Use *Table 6: Business/Farm Net Worth Adjustment* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#) to calculate the amount to be used.

Second, the student and spouse's **discretionary net worth** is calculated by subtracting the asset protection allowance (*Table 7: Education Savings and Asset Protection Allowance* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#)) from the net worth. Discretionary net worth can be less than zero.

Finally, the discretionary net worth is multiplied by the conversion rate of 20% to obtain the student and spouse's contribution from assets, which represents the portion of the value of the assets that is considered available to help pay for the student's college education. If the contribution from assets is less than zero, it's set to zero.

Calculation of student's EFC

The student's EFC is determined by adding the student and spouse's contribution from available income to their contribution from assets and then dividing the sum by the number in college in 2023-2024, as reported on the FAFSA form. If the student qualified for the simplified formula, the contribution from assets is excluded from the calculation of the EFC.

Alternate EFCs for other than nine-month enrollment

The standard EFC is for a nine-month enrollment period. If the student will be enrolled for less than nine months, the EFC is simply prorated by dividing it by nine and then multiplying the result by the number of months the student will be enrolled. For an enrollment of more than nine months, the EFC remains at the nine-month amount.

Formula C—Independent Student With Dependents Other Than A Spouse

The EFC for an independent student with dependents other than a spouse is calculated using the information for the student and spouse provided on the FAFSA form. The formula is like the formula for the parents of a dependent student. There are three basic steps.

1. Determine the student's available income.
2. Calculate the student's contribution from assets.
3. Calculate the EFC by adding the available income to the contribution from assets, then dividing by the number in college.

Available income

Available income is calculated by subtracting allowances from the student's total income. These allowances account for certain nondiscretionary costs, such as taxes and basic living expenses, and represent a minimum level of support. The formula assumes that the remaining income is available for discretionary purposes, including paying for a postsecondary education. The available income can be a negative number.

Student's total income. The student's total income is the sum of the student's and their spouse's (if the student is married) taxable and untaxed income, minus amounts reported in the income on the FAFSA form but excluded from the formula (see *Chapter 2* for more information on these exclusions). If the student and spouse are tax filers, AGI as reported on the FAFSA form is the amount of taxable income used in the calculation. If they are not tax filers, the calculation uses reported income earned from work. The total income can be a negative number.

Allowances against income. Total allowances are calculated by adding:

- **U.S. income tax paid.** Use the amount reported on the FAFSA. Non-tax filers don't receive this allowance. If this is a negative amount, it is set to zero.
- **State and other tax allowance.** Use *Table 1: State and Other Tax Allowance* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). This allowance is a percentage of the total income and approximates the average amount paid in state and other taxes. The percentage varies according to the state and according to whether the total income is below \$15,000 or is \$15,000 or more. The state to be used is the student's state of legal residence reported on the FAFSA form. If this item is blank or invalid, the state in the student's mailing address is used. If both items are blank or invalid, the "Other" rate for a blank or invalid state is used (2% for total income below \$15,000; 1% for total income of \$15,000 or more). If the allowance is a negative amount, it's set to zero.
- **Social Security tax allowance.** Use *Table 3: Social Security Tax* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). Apply the rates shown in the table separately to the student's and spouse's income earned from work in 2021 (as reported on the FAFSA form). The total allowance for Social Security taxes is never less than zero.
- **Income protection allowance.** Use *Table 5: Student and Spouse Income Protection Allowance* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). This allowance provides for the basic living expenses of a family. It varies according to the number in the student's household and the number in college in 2023-2024, as reported on the FAFSA form. In general, a school can assume that 30% of the income protection allowance is for food, 22% for housing, 9% for transportation expenses, 16% for clothing and personal care, 11% for medical care, and 12% for other family consumption. The income protection allowance used for a particular student is provided as one of the intermediate values in the FAA Information Section of the output document (labeled as "IPA").
- **Employment expense allowance.** Families with two working parents and one-parent families have extra expenses that must be considered, such as housekeeping services, transportation, clothing upkeep, and meals away from home. This allowance recognizes those extra expenses. When both the student and spouse work, the allowance is 35% of the lesser of the student's income earned from work (Question 35) or the spouse's income earned from work (Question 36), but may not exceed \$4,700. If the student isn't married, the allowance is 35% of the student's income earned from work, or \$4,700, whichever is less. If a student is married and only the student or the spouse (but not both) reports an income earned from work, the allowance is zero. The employment expense allowance is never less than zero.

Contribution from assets

In the full formula, the assets of an independent student with dependents other than a spouse are considered in order to fully measure the family's ability to contribute toward postsecondary educational costs. The formula determines a "contribution from assets," an amount that is combined with available income to give an accurate picture of the family's financial strength. In the simplified formula, the assets are not counted at all.

First, the **net worth** of a student and spouse's assets is calculated by adding assets reported on the FAFSA form. The net worth of a business or farm is adjusted to protect a portion of these assets. Use *Table 6: Business/Farm Net Worth Adjustment* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#) to calculate the amount to be used.

Second, the student and spouse's **discretionary net worth** is calculated by subtracting the asset protection allowance (*Table 7: Education Savings and Asset Protection Allowance* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#)) from the net worth. Discretionary net worth can be less than zero.

Finally, the discretionary net worth is multiplied by 7% to obtain the **contribution from assets**, which is the portion of

the value of the student's and spouse's assets considered to be available to help pay for the student's postsecondary education. If the contribution from assets is less than zero, it is set to zero.

Calculation of student's EFC

This is the final step in determining the EFC for the independent student with dependents other than a spouse. The available income and the contribution from assets are added together to obtain the adjusted available income. The adjusted available income can be a negative number. The total contribution from adjusted available income is calculated from using *Table 8: Contribution from AAI* in the [2023-2024 EFC Formula Guide](#). This is the total amount the student's family is expected to contribute toward family postsecondary educational costs. The rates in *Table 8* increase from 22% to 47% as the adjusted available income increases. The rate is based on the principle that as income increases beyond the amount needed to maintain a basic standard of living, the portion used for family maintenance decreases, while the portion available for discretionary purposes increases. The larger the income, the easier it is for a family to contribute toward postsecondary educational costs with less effect on the maintenance of the family. If the total contribution from adjusted available income is negative, it is set to zero.

Dividing the total student's contribution from adjusted available income by the number in college, as reported on the FAFSA form, yields the EFC for the 2023-2024 award year.

Alternate EFCs for other than nine-month enrollment

The standard EFC is for a nine-month enrollment period. If the student will be enrolled for less than nine months, the EFC is simply prorated by dividing it by nine and then multiplying the result by the number of months the student will be enrolled. For an enrollment of more than nine months, the EFC remains at the nine-month amount.

Chapter 4

Verification, Updates, and Corrections

Because students sometimes make errors on their application, there is a process for verifying applications and making corrections. The Central Processing System (CPS) selects which applications are to be verified, but you also have the authority to verify additional students.

You must verify applications selected by the CPS of students who will receive or have received subsidized student financial assistance, as defined below. Verification is not required for students who are only eligible for unsubsidized student financial assistance (however, see *Verification exclusions* later in this chapter for an important caveat). While graduate students are ineligible for most types of subsidized Title IV aid, they are eligible for Federal Work-Study and would need to complete verification if they are selected and receive that aid. Students who are eligible for both subsidized and unsubsidized Title IV aid may not avoid verification by accepting only unsubsidized aid; they must complete verification to receive any Title IV aid (see the “Disbursing unsubsidized aid” section later in this chapter for more information).

Subsidized student financial assistance programs

Title IV programs for which eligibility is determined by the EFC: the Pell Grant, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG), Federal Work-Study (FWS), and Direct Subsidized Loan programs.

Unsubsidized student financial assistance programs

Title IV programs for which eligibility is not based on the EFC: the Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grant, Direct Unsubsidized Loan, and Direct PLUS Loan programs.

The Iraq and Afghanistan Service Grant is a non-need-based grant and is not subject to verification.

Required Policies and Procedures

Your school must have written policies about

- the time in which students must submit verification documentation,
- the consequences for failing to submit those documents in time,
- the method you use to notify students if their expected family contribution (EFC) and Title IV aid amounts change,
- the procedures you or students follow to correct FAFSA data, and
- the procedure you follow to refer a student to the Office of Inspector General (OIG) (see *Chapter 5*).

Your school must provide the following to students selected for verification in a timely manner:

- A clear explanation of their role in the process.
- A list of documents they need to submit.
- Deadlines they must meet and the consequences of failing to meet them.

The FSA Assessments, located in the Knowledge Center under the “Resource Type” subpart of the Library section, includes various activities under the [verification assessment](#) that you can use to evaluate your verification process. In addition, the Department has a list of [questions and answers about verification](#) located within our Program Integrity Q & A

website.

Policies and procedures

34 CFR 668.53

Verification selection and professional judgement (PJ)

You must complete verification for a selected student before you exercise professional judgment (PJ) to adjust any values used to calculate the EFC. *But a PJ adjustment does not require you to verify an application not selected.*

Once the Department selects a FAFSA application for verification, every subsequent transaction for that award year, even one resulting from PJ, will indicate that the student is selected for verification.

If a FAFSA that is not selected for verification is later corrected, that can result in the application being selected. However, when PJ is used (and coded correctly) to adjust an application that is not selected for verification, the CPS prevents the subsequent transaction from being selected for verification.

Verification and PJ

34 CFR 668.53(c)

Applications and Information to be Verified

The Department's long-term goal is for a customized approach to verification. A menu of potential verification items for each award year will be published in the *Federal Register*, and the items to verify for a given application will be selected from that menu and indicated on the SAR/ISIR. Those output documents will continue to include only one verification flag to show students who were selected, and they will need to verify all the FAFSA items below that apply to them.

See the [July 8, 2022, Federal Register Notice](#) for the verification items for 2023–2024. There were no changes from items required for 2022–2023:

- Adjusted gross income (AGI)
- U.S. income tax paid
- Untaxed portions of IRA distributions
- Untaxed portions of pensions
- IRA deductions and payments
- Tax-exempt interest income
- Education credits
- Income earned from work
- Household size
- Number in college
- Identity/statement of educational purpose

The verification flag will have a value of “Y,” and next to the EFC will be an asterisk referring to a comment in the student section of the SAR that tells applicants they will be asked by their schools to provide documentation. A verification

tracking flag will be set on the applicant’s Institutional Student Information Record (ISIR) to indicate placement in one of the 2023–2024 verification tracking groups.

Verification items

34 CFR 668.56

School-selected verification

In some cases, you, not the CPS, will select a student for verification. You must verify any information you have reason to believe is incorrect on an application. Also, you may at your discretion require a student to verify any FAFSA information and provide reasonable documentation according to consistently applied school policies. In either case you may, but are not required to, include any of the CPS verification items not already included. Whether you do that or not, students with these applications are considered selected for verification and, as with CPS-selected applications, all other verification requirements, such as deadlines, allowable tolerances, and interim disbursement rules, apply.

When schools choose to verify an item other than those the Department selects, they may delay disbursing Title IV aid until verification is completed if the school-selected item can affect the student’s Title IV eligibility, such as an item about dependency status. But schools cannot delay disbursing Title IV funds when the item has no bearing on Title IV aid, for example, if the school is verifying home equity to determine student eligibility for school or state aid.

Verification tracking groups

Students who are selected for verification will be placed in one of the following groups to determine which FAFSA information must be verified.

V1—Standard Verification Group. Students in this group must verify the following if they are ***tax filers***:

- Adjusted gross income
- U.S. income tax paid
- Untaxed portions of IRA distributions
- Untaxed portions of pensions
- IRA deductions and payments
- Tax-exempt interest income
- Education credits
- Household size
- Number in college

Students who are ***not tax filers*** must verify the following:

- Income earned from work
- Household size
- Number in college

V4—Custom Verification Group. Students must verify identity/statement of educational purpose (SEP).

V5—Aggregate Verification Group. Students must verify identity/SEP in addition to the items in the Standard Verification Group (V1).

Groups V2, V3, and V6 are reserved for future use by the Department.

Changing tracking groups

A student may move from Verification Tracking Group V1 or V4 to group V5 based on corrections made to his or her CPS record or on other information available to the Department. If verification was already completed for the previous group, the student is only required to verify the V5 information that was not already verified. If verification was not completed for the previous group, the student needs to verify all of the V5 information.

No disbursements of Title IV aid may be made until the V5 verification is satisfactorily completed. If the student doesn't complete verification, the school is not liable for any Title IV aid it disbursed prior to receiving the group V5 ISIR. The student is liable for the full amount because without verification there is no evidence he or she was eligible for that aid. See the [October 31, 2016, announcement](#) for more information about disbursements and potential return of funds when students are selected for verification.

Reporting results for groups V4 and V5

You must report the verification results of identity for any student for whom you (1) receive an ISIR with tracking flag V4 or V5—*as selected by the CPS, not your school*—and (2) request verification documentation. You report this information on the FAA Access to CPS Online website: select the Identity Verification Results option from the main menu, enter your school identifiers, the award year, and the student identifiers. For the 2023–2024 award year, you will then enter one of the following numeric codes that most applies:

- 1-Verification completed in person, no issues found
- 2-Verification completed remotely, no issues found
- 3-Verification attempted, issues found with identity. (You did not receive acceptable documentation for the SEP or identity.)
- 5-No response from applicant or unable to locate

Note: Numeric codes 4 and 6 are not valid for 2022–2023 and beyond. These codes were used to report issues with high school completion status, which is no longer a required verification item. For more information regarding the implementation of the removal of high school completion status beginning with the 2022–2023 verification process, please see the [September 1, 2021 electronic announcement](#).

You are required to report results **no more than 60 days** following your first request to the student for documentation of identity. Inaccurate and untimely reporting may subject your school to findings because of your annual compliance audit or a program review. If there is a change in a result you have already submitted, you can submit the new code using the above process and must make that change **within 30 days** of becoming aware that a change occurred. The most recent submission will supplant prior award year submissions. Because the FAA Access website does not store a list of these verification results for you to retrieve, we recommend you print and keep the confirmation page for your records.

Instead of using this individual method, you can submit verification results by uploading a flat file with the data for up to 2,000 students. Each record must contain only the nine-digit SSN, the two-character name ID, and the appropriate numeric result code from above. Each line of data must contain only one record. Do not use hyphens, empty lines, or spaces (unless the student does not have a last name, in which case enter two spaces). This is an example of two records reported via the flat file:

111223333BE1

222334444OL5

Verification for confined or incarcerated students

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 added section 484(t) to the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (HEA) to formally establish Pell Grant eligibility for confined or incarcerated students, if they are enrolled in a prison education program as defined under the HEA. The Department is currently in the process of establishing regulations to implement the statutory requirements, which will be effective July 1, 2023.

For the 2023-24 award year, a confined or incarcerated student as indicated through the new incarcerated applicant flag will only be required to verify their identity and statement of educational purpose if selected for Verification Tracking Group V4 or V5. In addition, institutions are not required to verify a confined or incarcerated student selected under Verification Tracking Flag V1. See [GEN-22-09](#) for additional information on verification requirements for confined or incarcerated students.

Verification exclusions

There are times when you don't need to verify a student's application. You are, however, still required to resolve conflicting information (except when a student dies during the award year or when he or she is no longer enrolled and will not re-enroll; see *Chapter 5*). You should document the basis for the verification exclusion. Other information not excluded must still be verified according to all other requirements.

You don't have to verify FAFSA information of a student in the following situations:

- *Death of the student.* You don't have to continue verification if you made an interim disbursement and the student died before verification was completed. You cannot make any additional disbursements, except for FWS funds already earned, to any of the student's beneficiaries. You cannot originate or disburse his or her Direct Subsidized Loan or consider any interim disbursement you made of Pell or FSEOG funds or provisional FWS employment to be an overpayment.
- *Not an aid recipient.* The student won't receive Title IV aid for reasons other than a failure to complete verification. This includes being ineligible for that aid and withdrawing without receiving it.
- *The applicant is eligible to receive only unsubsidized student financial assistance.* However, students selected for V4 or V5 verification should complete it in accord with the answer to DOC-Q18 on the [verification Q and A page](#).
- *Applicant verified by another school.* The student completed verification for the current award year at another school before transferring. His or her FAFSA data must be the same as it was at the previous school, and you must get a letter from that school stating that it verified the student's application and providing the transaction number of the pertinent valid ISIR.
- *Post enrollment.* The student was selected for verification **after** ceasing to be enrolled at your school, he or she does not intend to reenroll for the award year, and no further (including late) disbursements will be made.

Unless you have reason to believe it is inaccurate, you don't have to verify the reported FAFSA information of the **parents of a dependent student** if any of the following apply (including in cases where there is only one parent):

- Both parents are mentally incapacitated.
- Both parents or the custodial parent has died.
- They are residing in a country other than the United States and can't be contacted by normal means.
- They can't be located because the student does not have and cannot get their contact information.

Unless you have reason to believe it is inaccurate, you don't have to verify the reported FAFSA information of the **spouse of an independent student** if any of the following apply:

- The spouse has died.
- The spouse is mentally incapacitated.
- The spouse is residing in a country other than the United States and can't be contacted by normal means.
- The spouse can't be located because the student does not have and cannot get his or her contact information.

Example: Ursula is attending Lem Community College, and her application is selected for verification. She provided her husband's information on the application but now explains that he recently moved out and she can't locate him. She also gives Lem documents to show that she's tried to locate her husband. Lem determines that Ursula doesn't need to verify her husband's tax and income information. Of course, she still needs to verify her own information.

Verification exclusions

34 CFR 668.54(b)

Verification following disasters

The Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) [GEN-17-08](#) gives general guidance for awarding aid in federally declared disasters. It states that the Secretary will not enforce the verification requirements during the award year for applicants whose records were lost or destroyed because of a disaster if the school has tried to preserve and reconstruct any records. The school must document when it does not perform verification for this reason and use status code “S” when reporting the disbursement of Pell Grants to affected students. Also, the requirement for dependent students to submit a statement signed by a parent regarding household size and number in college is waived if the parents cannot provide the signature due to the disaster. The school must note why no parent was able to provide the statement.

Schools that experience a local disaster (rather than a federally declared one) that affects Title IV administration should consult their regional [school participation division](#).

Refer to the resources for higher education institutions on the Department’s [Coronavirus webpage](#) for guidance pertaining to the on-going COVID-19 national emergency, including various verification flexibilities.

Documentation

The [July 8, 2022, Federal Register](#) gives the documentation required for verifying 2023–2024 application data, which depends on the item verified, as explained in this section. The Department encourages students and parents to use the IRS Data Retrieval Tool (DRT) to import data from their tax return and not change it. It is the fastest, easiest, and most secure method of meeting verification requirements. In addition, the Department has developed suggested text that, if you choose, you can use to create a verification document and to verify non-tax items, such as household size and number in college. To review the suggested text for 2023-2024, please see [GEN-22-09](#).

If you use a verification document, be sure that it is signed, that all required sections are completed, and that any relevant tax or alternative documents are attached. Copies are acceptable, and unless specifically noted in this chapter, a signature on a copy is as valid as an original signature (i.e., a handwritten or “wet” signature). If a copy of the tax return is used, the filer (or at least one of the filers of a joint return) must sign it or the tax preparer must provide his or her name and SSN, EIN, or PTIN.

The following chart shows the tax form line numbers for the most commonly reported items. This chart is a reference only; it is not a list of all the items the school must check on a tax return.

Line items from the 2021 1040 tax return

AGI

Line 11

Income tax paid

Line 22 minus Schedule 2 line 2

Deductible IRA/SEP

Schedule 1 line 16 plus 20

Tax-exempt interest income

Line 2a

Untaxed portions of IRA distributions and pensions (excluding rollovers)

(Line 4a minus 4b; if negative, use zero) plus (Line 5a minus 5b; if negative, use zero)

Documenting AGI, taxes paid, and other tax data with the DRT

As already noted, the importation of IRS tax data via the DRT is the best way to document that information. Students and parents do this either when initially filling out the FAFSA or later as a correction. For the retrieved data to be acceptable documentation of tax data, students and parents must not change the data after it is transferred from the IRS—if the data was changed or if you have reason to believe the data transferred is incorrect, the student will need to provide a tax return transcript or a signed copy of the tax return. The IRS request field(s) on the ISIR will have a value of “02” when the data is unchanged. The following items are imported from IRS form 1040 to a student’s FAFSA form via the DRT:

- Tax return filing status
- Type of tax return filed
- Adjusted gross income
- Taxes paid
- Tax-exempt interest income
- Untaxed portions of IRA distributions
- Untaxed portions of pensions
- IRA deductions
- Education credits
- Income earned from work

In the following situations, the IRS DRT is **not** available in the FAFSA online (all apply to both students and parents unless otherwise noted):

- The person did not indicate on the FAFSA form that the tax return has been completed.
- The person filed a non-U.S. tax return.
- The marriage date is January 2022 or later.
- The person answered married on the FAFSA form and filed the tax return either as head of household or married but filing a separate return.
- The first three digits of the SSN are 666.
- Neither married parent entered a valid SSN.
- An unmarried parent or both married parents entered all zeroes for the SSN.

AGI and income tax documentation

34 CFR 668.57(a)

Using a joint return to figure individual AGI and taxes paid

If the filer of a joint return has become widowed, divorced, or separated since filing the return, it may be necessary to determine the individual’s income and taxes paid using the joint return and W-2 forms. If a W-2 is not available (the filer is self-employed, for example) or if a duplicate copy from the employer who issued the original W-2 is not available in a timely manner, the school may permit the filer to provide a signed statement that certifies the base year AGI and U.S. taxes paid. If he has divorced and married someone new (see “Parent

remarriage after applying” section discussed later in this chapter if this occurred after completion of the application), then the new spouse’s income and assets would also need to be included.

Add the income amounts from the individual’s W-2 forms to any other income that can be extracted from the joint return. Any interest or business income earned on joint accounts or investments should be assessed at 50%. The same procedure should be used to divide business or farm losses. Also, if the AGI listed on the joint return was adjusted, you should reduce the individual’s AGI by the portion of the adjustment that applies solely to him or her. An AGI figure can be calculated for the individual filer. A signed statement from the filer certifying that the data from the joint return were accurately assessed is sufficient documentation for this method.

Use one of the following methods to figure the individual’s taxes paid:

- **Tax table (preferred method).** Using the IRS Tax Table or Tax Rate Schedule for the appropriate year, calculate the amount of tax that would have been paid if a separate return had been filed. Use the deductions the individual could have claimed if he or she had filed a separate return. (If itemized deductions were taken, count only the portion of those deductions that could have been claimed on a separate tax return.)
- **Proportional distribution.** Determine what percentage of the joint AGI was attributable to the individual, and then assess the joint taxes paid by that same percentage.

Example

Calculating the individual AGI from a joint return

Eddy’s application is selected for verification. He and his spouse filed a joint return for 2021 and have since divorced. The AGI on Eddy’s FAFSA matches the AGI of \$56,500 on the 2021 tax return, which means it’s wrong because it includes his former spouse’s income.

Eddy’s W-2 shows that his income for 2021 was \$25,900, and the tax return shows \$400 in interest. Because it was interest on a joint savings account, the aid administrator adds \$200 of it to Eddy’s income and submits \$26,100 as the corrected income via FAA Access.

Calculating the individual tax from a joint return

The aid administrator determines that Eddy’s part of the \$56,500 AGI he and his spouse reported is \$26,100. If he had filed his tax return as single, his standard deduction would have been \$12,550 (instead of \$25,100 for married filers). Eddy’s income of \$26,100 minus \$12,550 for the standard deduction results in \$13,550 in taxable income.

The aid administrator uses the 2021 tax table to determine how much tax Eddy would have paid on this amount, considering any applicable credits reported on the original return. With a taxable income of \$13,550, the tax amount from the tax schedule is \$1,430.

To use the proportional distribution method instead, the aid administrator figures out what percentage of the joint AGI Eddy’s income represents. The percentage is 46% ($26,100 \div 56,500$ is .4619). The aid administrator then multiplies the income tax paid as reported on the tax return (\$3,373 for this example) by this percentage. Eddy’s income tax by using this method is \$1,552 ($.46 \times \$3,373$).

Using the tax transcript

If students cannot or will not use the DRT, either at initial FAFSA filing or through online corrections, you can use an IRS tax return transcript for the student, spouse, and/or parents, as applicable, to document AGI, taxes paid, and untaxed income. Before requesting a transcript, they should allow enough time to pass after filing the return; it takes the IRS 2 to 4 weeks to process returns filed electronically and 6 to 8 weeks for mailed returns. Tax transcripts submitted to your school for verification do not need to be signed by the tax filer (but it is encouraged) unless you have reason to doubt their authenticity.

There are a few ways to request a tax return transcript: online at www.irs.gov/individuals/get-transcript, by calling 1-800-908-9946, or by mailing the paper Form 4506-T-EZ, which can be printed from the IRS website. To order a fiscal year tax transcript for verification, use Form 4506-T instead of Form 4506-T-EZ. Phone requests are via an automated process instead of an IRS representative. With online requests, tax filers can get an electronic transcript (see below) or they can have the IRS mail them a paper transcript; nononline requests yield a mailed transcript. Schools can accept and copy transcripts originally obtained from the IRS.

The Get Transcript Online feature allows users to get the transcript in real time as a portable document format (PDF) file, which they can submit electronically to a school or print and submit as a hard copy. To use the Get Transcript Online tool, users must have:

- access to a valid email address,
- a text-enabled mobile phone in their name, and
- specific financial account numbers, such as a credit card number or an account number for a home mortgage or auto loan. The process will not cause charges to the card or the account.

See the [IRS.gov website](https://www.irs.gov) for more information on the Get Transcript Service.

The IRS's Income Verification Express Service (IVES) allows a third party to receive a tax filer's transcript. The IVES participant submits a 4506-T or 4506-T-EZ form, signed by the tax filer, and receives the transcript from the IRS, which charges a small fee for the service. Schools may [apply to participate in IVES](#). They may also use a transcript from another IVES participant (which is not considered a third-party servicer in this case) for verification if they have no reason to doubt its authenticity. Schools may not, pass on the charge for using this service to the student.

To combat identity theft, the IRS masks much of the personally identifiable information on the transcript. For example, only the last four digits of any SSN or account or telephone number are displayed. The option on forms 4506-T and 4506-T-EZ to designate a third-party recipient of the transcript has been eliminated. As noted above, schools can elect to participate in IVES as a way of receiving transcripts directly from the IRS. Taxpayers will create a "customer file number" which appears on a requested transcript, to help facilitate identification. This can be something like a student's college ID number or some other number (but **not** an SSN). See the [October 4, 2018, announcement](#) and the [IRS news release](#) for more.

Each year the Department provides a tax return transcript matrix to assist schools with reviewing tax data. Specifically, the **tax return transcript matrix** consists of a chart of the FAFSA and ISIR tax items used for verification and their corresponding line items from the various IRS tax returns and the tax transcript for the appropriate award year. At the time the 2023–2024 Application and Verification Guide was published, the 2021 tax return transcript matrix had not been posted to [FSA's Knowledge Center](#). Please stay tuned to the electronic announcement section in the Knowledge Center for the latest information.

The tax return transcript may show a **per computer amount** for some tax data that is different from what the filer reported to the IRS. The per computer amount should be used because it corrects mathematical errors and is more accurate than what appears on the original return or was transferred via the DRT. This guidance still holds, but because the DRT reports per computer values for AGI, income tax paid, and education tax credits, there should not be many discrepancies between DRT data and the transcript. Also, if a transcript indicates "recomputed <tax return item> per computer," that amount may be ignored for verification.

Schools may accept for verification any IRS tax transcript that includes all the necessary information: adjusted gross income, U.S. income tax paid, untaxed IRA distributions, untaxed pensions, education credits, IRA deductions and tax-exempt interest. Because the record of account and the Return Transcript for Taxpayer (RTFTP) include all the above information, either may be used for verification. The Information Returns Processing Transcript Request—Wages (IRPTR-W) only provides wage information and therefore can only be used in lieu of a W-2 form. See the [February 23, 2017, announcement](#) for information about the documents obtained from the IRS that are used for verification: the tax return transcript, the record of account, the account transcript, and the wage and income transcript. The announcement also explains Form 13873, which students or parents might receive when requesting documents from the IRS.

Rollovers and verification

Qualified rollovers from one retirement account to another are not taxable, and they should not be counted as untaxed

income (as indicated in *Chapter 2*). Since neither the DRT nor a tax transcript identifies rollovers, you must get documentation from the tax filer. This could be a signed statement with the rollover amount or a notation by the filer on the tax transcript that includes the word “rollover” beside any applicable item, like the instruction the IRS gives for Form 1040. The annotation must be signed and dated by the filer. For those who used the DRT, a signed confirmation that the IRA or pension distribution included a rollover would suffice; a tax transcript would only be needed if other IRS tax information was changed. See VI-Q4 on the [Q and A page](#).

Using the tax return

Although the DRT and tax transcript are preferable for completing verification, students can also submit a copy of the tax return and any applicable schedules. However, see the guidance under victims of identity theft later in this volume for an important caveat. The tax return will likely have been filed electronically with one of a variety of methods. These include do-it-yourself methods as well as completion by a tax preparer. Each method should permit printing of a paper copy of the return, though the e-file format might not contain every line item, showing instead only the data the tax filer provided. For example, if Item 2b, “Taxable interest,” does not appear on such a return, that means no taxable interest income was reported.

You can accept a paper or electronic copy of the return if it contains a signature. Acceptable examples would include, but are not limited to:

1. A signed paper return that the student either mailed or brought to the school.
2. A signed paper return that the student faxed or scanned and emailed.
3. An electronic copy that the student signed with a stylus or finger.
4. An electronic copy that we consider signed because it has an image of the student’s signature attached.

However, a signature on Form 8879, the IRS e-file Signature Authorization, is not an acceptable substitute for a signature on the tax return.

For persons who have a tax professional prepare their return, instead of a copy of the return with the filer’s signature, you may accept one that has the name and PTIN of the preparer or has his or her SSN or EIN and has been signed, stamped, typed, or printed with his or her name and address. Note that the IRS requires paid preparers to have a PTIN.

If a person did not retain a copy of his or her 2021 tax information and it cannot be located by the IRS or the relevant government agency, he or she must submit a signed statement indicating that they did not keep a copy of their tax information as well as documentation from the taxing authority indicating that the information cannot be located. Also, you must accept for an IRS filer either a copy of Form W-2 for each source of employment income received for 2021 or, if he or she is self-employed, a signed statement certifying the amount of AGI and taxes paid. For someone who filed an income tax return with a government of a U.S. territory or commonwealth or a foreign central government, accept a copy of a wage and tax statement or a signed statement certifying the amount of AGI and taxes paid for 2021.

If a W-2 is not available

If an individual who is required to submit an IRS Form W-2 did not save a copy, he or she should request a replacement W-2 from the employer who issued the original. A W-2 transcript from the IRS is also acceptable though it generally is not available until the year after the W-2 information is filed with the IRS (e.g., 2023 for 2021 information filed in 2022). If he or she is unable to obtain one in a timely manner, you may permit him or her to provide a signed statement that includes the amount of income earned from work, the source of that income, and the reason why the W-2 is not available in a timely manner.

Immigrants and tax filing

Immigrants are not exempt from tax filing. The IRS is more concerned whether a person is a resident or nonresident—rather than legal or illegal—alien. An alien is anyone who is not a U.S. citizen or national. A resident alien is one who either is a permanent resident or has resided in the U.S. for a specific minimum amount of time (has met the substantial presence test). All others are nonresident aliens. Resident aliens’ income is generally subject to tax in the same manner

as U.S. citizens', and they file Form 1040. Nonresident aliens who are required to file a return submit Form 1040NR or 1040NR-EZ; both forms are acceptable documentation for verification.

Immigrants who do not have an SSN and are unable to get one can apply with the IRS for an individual taxpayer identification number (ITIN). The ITIN is only for tax purposes. It does not authorize a person to work, endorse his or her legal status, or entitle him or her to the earned income credit or Social Security benefits. It is not to be used as an identifier in place of the SSN on the FAFSA form.

See the IRS's *Publication 519, U.S. Tax Guide for Aliens* at www.irs.gov for more information.

Special situations

- **Filing extensions.** Because the FAFSA form uses prior-year tax data, even individuals who have an automatic six-month extension by the IRS should have completed their tax return by the time of verification. Therefore, they must verify income and tax information either by using the IRS Data Retrieval Tool or by submitting an acceptable tax return or transcript to the institution. Only students (and spouses if applicable) and parents granted an extension beyond six months may submit the following for verification:
 - a copy of the IRS's approval of an extension beyond the automatic six-month extension for tax year 2021;
 - verification of non-filing (see non-tax filers for more information) from the IRS dated on or after October 1, 2022;
 - copies of all their W-2 forms (or equivalent) for 2021 employment income; and
 - if self-employed, a signed statement with the amounts of their AGI and U.S. income tax paid 2021.

You may require those with a filing extension to use the DRT or submit to your school a tax transcript or return after it has been filed. If you do that, you must reverify the income information. If the student does not use the DRT or submit a tax transcript or return, see the guidance described under the "Deadlines and Failure to Submit Documentation" section later in this chapter on failing to complete verification. See DOC-Q16 on the [Q and A page](#).

For a person called up for active duty or qualifying National Guard duty during a war, another military operation, or a national emergency, a school must accept a statement from the person certifying that he or she has not filed an income tax return or a request for a filing extension because of that service.

- **Joint return filers who are no longer married.** When a dependent student's parents filed a joint return and have separated, divorced, married someone else, or been widowed, the student must submit a tax transcript or return **and** a copy of each W-2 form for the parent whose tax information is on the FAFSA form. Similarly, an independent student must submit a tax transcript or return **and** a copy of his or her W-2 forms if he or she filed a joint return and is separated, divorced, or a widow.
- **For non-tax filers** you must receive a W-2 form for each source of 2021 employment income and a signed statement certifying that the person has not filed and is not required to file a 2021 tax return. You must also get a signed statement giving the sources and amounts of the person's income earned from work not found on W-2s. Students may sign on a nonfiling spouse's behalf.

For residents of the Freely Associated States (the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau, or the Federated States of Micronesia), a copy of the wage and tax statement from each employer (substitute for W-2s) and a signed statement identifying any other employment income for the year not identified on the wage and tax statement is acceptable. Persons from a U.S. territory or commonwealth or a foreign country who are not required to file a tax return can provide a signed statement certifying their income.

You must also require the person (*except dependent students*) to submit a "Verification of Nonfiling (VNF) Letter" from the IRS dated on or after October 1, 2022, attesting that he or she did not file a 2021 IRS tax return. The nonfiler can get this by sending IRS Form 4506-T and checking box 7. Also acceptable is other IRS documentation that clearly states the IRS does not have a tax record for the year, such as a return transcript with the message "no record of return filed" or "no transcript on file." Messages that aren't as clear, such as "could not be processed," are not acceptable alternatives. See the [February 23, 2017, electronic announcement](#) for more information.

Persons subject to foreign tax codes would submit a comparable document; see DOC-Q30 on the [Q and A page](#). Note that verification of nonfiling only shows that a person did not file a tax return, not that he or she was not required to file one. See **Chapter 5** if a person whose financial information was on the FAFSA form did not file a tax return when it appears he or she was required to, and see DOC-Q29 on the [Q and A page](#) about non-tax filers who lack any identifying number (e.g., SSN) needed to get a confirmation of nonfiling from the IRS.

- **Individuals who can't get a VNF letter** from the IRS (or other tax authority) may instead submit a signed statement if the school has no reason to question the student's or family's good-faith effort to acquire the letter. Form 4506-T states that most requests are processed within 10 business days, so at least that amount of time should elapse before schools resort to a signed statement. Also, since a VNF must be dated on or after October 1, 2022, the statement cannot be signed and used before that date.

The statement must assert that the person attempted but was unable to get the VNF. For non-tax filers, the statement must also confirm that they have not filed and are not required to file a tax return for the relevant year, and it must list the sources and amounts of income earned from work. For extension filers, the statement must also confirm that they have not yet filed a return for the tax year and must list the sources and amounts of income; if they are self-employed, it must include the amount of AGI and U.S. income tax paid. Note that in both cases—for non-tax filers and extension filers—the other required documentation (e.g., W-2 forms) must still be provided.

- **For filers of non-IRS tax returns**, you may accept a transcript from a government of a foreign nation or a U.S. territory or commonwealth that has all the filer's income and tax data to be verified. Or you may accept a copy of the tax return, which must be signed by the filer or one of the filers of a joint return. Use the income and tax data that most closely corresponds to what is on the IRS tax return and convert monetary amounts into U.S. dollars as appropriate. If you question the accuracy of the information on the signed copy of the return, the filer must provide you with a copy of the tax account information issued by the tax authority. See DOC-Q28 on the [Q and A page](#).
- **Filers of amended returns.** Students or parents who file an amended return (IRS Form 1040X) can use the DRT though the ISIR will show an IRS Request Flag value of 07 (for more information review the "IRS Data Retrieval Tool" section in Chapter 2). Because the tax return transcript does not reflect changes to the original return by the filer or the IRS, it is by itself not sufficient. So when an amended return was filed, you must submit any changes to nondollar items and to single monetary items of \$25 or more. To complete verification, you will need a signed copy of the 1040X form that was filed as well as either
 - IRS DRT information on an ISIR record with all the information from the original tax return; or
 - any IRS transcript (which does not have to be signed) that includes all the income and tax information required to be verified or a signed copy of the tax return and applicable schedules.

Note that there may be instances when a student, spouse, or parent did not file a 1040X with the IRS but had their tax and income information amended by the IRS. In such a case a school may accept one of the items mentioned above plus documentation showing the IRS's change(s). Please note that if the IRS amends the return, the IRS Request Flag value will also be labeled 07.

- **Victims of identity theft** who cannot get a return transcript or use the DRT submit a Tax Return Database View (TRDBV) transcript as well as a signed and dated statement indicating that they were victims of tax-related identity theft, and that the IRS is aware of it. They do this by calling the IRS's Identity Protection Specialized Unit (IPSU) at 800- 908-4490. After the IPSU authenticates the tax filer's identity, he or she can ask the IRS to mail the TRDBV transcript, which is an alternate paper transcript that will look different than a regular transcript but that is official and can be used for verification. Unless you doubt its authenticity, you don't need to get an IRS signature or stamp or any other validation. See [DCL GEN-14-05](#) for a sample TRDBV transcript. Those who cannot obtain a TRDBV transcript may instead submit a copy of the tax return or another official IRS transcript or equivalent IRS document if it includes all the income and tax information required to be verified. Note that filers must first attempt to get a TRDBV before they can use a copy of the tax return or another transcript. Then, if the school has no reason to doubt the victim of identity theft or the accuracy of the document, it can be used to complete verification.
- **Students eligible for an automatic zero EFC.** A **dependent student** in this category who is placed in Verification Tracking Group V1 or V5 must only verify the following information:
 1. his or her parents' AGI if they were tax filers;
 2. their income earned from work if they were non-tax filers (who must also follow the guidance given for non-filers); and
 3. the student must also verify identity and sign a statement of educational purpose if in group V5.

An **independent student** must only verify the following information:

1. his or her and, if applicable, his or her spouse's AGI if they were tax filers;
2. their income earned from work if they were non-tax filers (who must also follow the guidance given for non-filers);
3. identity (student-must also sign a statement of educational purpose if in group V5); and
4. the number of household members to determine if the student has any dependents other than a spouse.

All students eligible for an auto zero EFC who are placed in Verification Tracking Group V4 must verify identity and sign a statement of educational purpose.

Household size

To document the household size, the student needs to provide a statement signed by him or her and, if dependent, at least one parent that gives the name, age, and relationship to the student of each person in the household.

Household size documentation

34 CFR 668.57(b)

You don't have to verify household size in the following situations:

- For a dependent student, the household size reported is two with a single, divorced, separated, or widowed parent or is three with parents who are married or are unmarried and living together
- For an independent student, the number reported is two if the student is married or one if the student is single, divorced, separated, or widowed

Keep in mind that household size needs to align with the answers to the relevant dependency status questions, such as the one about having dependents other than a spouse. If verification reveals that answers do not match, the FAFSA form needs to be corrected so that the information is in alignment.

Number in college

You can document this item with a statement signed by the student (and, if he or she is dependent, at least one parent) that gives the name and age of each person in the household (*excluding the parents of a dependent student*) who is enrolled at least half time in a degree or certificate program at an eligible postsecondary institution along with the name of each postsecondary institution. This statement can also be written to document household size. Completion of the Department's verification suggested text can satisfy both items as outlined in [GEN-22-09](#).

If you have reason to doubt the enrollment information reported, you must obtain a statement from each school the named person will attend there on at least a half-time basis. You don't have to get such a statement if the person has not yet registered, is attending less than half time, or will be attending your school.

If you have reason to doubt whether a reported school is Title IV eligible, you must insure it is, such as by checking to see if it has a federal school code or checking with your regional school participation division.

You don't have to verify the number in college if the reported number enrolled is one (the student only).

Number in college documentation

34 CFR 668.57(c)

Identity and statement of educational purpose

Students should appear in person at your school and present a valid, unexpired, government-issued photo identification (ID) such as a U.S. passport, a driver's license, or other state-issued ID. "Unexpired" means the ID has not expired at the time it is checked, even if it will expire before the end of the award year. A valid government-issued photo identification is

one issued by the U.S. government, any of the 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, a federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native Tribe, American Samoa, Guam, the Virgin Islands, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, or the Republic of Palau.

You must maintain an annotated copy of that ID that includes the date it was received and the name of the person your school authorized to receive it. The school may determine which of its staff are authorized to review an applicant’s identity. We recommend that the person(s) be full-time staff and the school keep a record of who they are. Note that an ID issued by a state university or college is not sufficient for this purpose. Nor is a military ID since 18 U.S. Code § 701 prohibits it from being photocopied.

Students must also sign (it must be a “wet” signature) a statement of educational purpose that certifies who they are and that the federal student aid they may receive will only be used for educational purposes and for the cost of attending the school for the 2023–2024 year. Unlike the other suggested text provided in [GEN-22-09](#), the text for the “Statement of Educational Purpose” is not suggested—you must use the exact language given (the student’s identification number is optional though if collected elsewhere on the same page as the statement). After examining the statement, you may convert it into an electronic record. You must keep that or the original for at least the required Title IV record retention period.

A student who is unable to appear at your school must go to a notary public and sign the statement of educational purpose. He or she must then submit to your office that statement (again, with the “wet” signature), a certification from the notary that he or she appeared before the notary and presented a government-issued photo ID confirming his or her identity, and a copy of the same ID. Currently the Department does not authorize the use of online notary services as an alternative to traditional, in-person notary services.

The **REAL ID Act** affects people entering certain restricted areas where identification is required: federal facilities, nuclear power plants, and federally regulated commercial airplanes. Because there are currently no restrictions under the act on agencies accepting an ID that is not compliant with the act (typically one marked “not for federal identification”) for other purposes, such an ID is acceptable for verification of identity/statement of educational purpose. It must be a government-issued ID that has not expired and includes the student’s photo and name.

Interim Disbursements

Interim disbursements are allowed either prior to completing verification or after verification but before receiving the corrected SAR or ISIR. If you have no reason to question the accuracy of the information on the FAFSA form, prior to completing verification you may at your discretion

1. make one disbursement of Pell and FSEOG funds for the applicant’s first payment period;
2. permit FWS employment for the first 60 consecutive days after the student enrolls for the award year; or
3. originate but not disburse a Direct Subsidized Loan.

If verification results in changes to the FAFSA information that you determine will not alter award amounts, you may at your discretion take actions 1–3 as well as disburse a Direct Subsidized Loan prior to receiving the corrected *valid SAR or ISIR* (defined as a SAR or ISIR on which all the information reported on a student’s FAFSA form is accurate and complete as of the date the application is signed; see 34 CFR 668.2).

Interim disbursements

34 CFR 668.58

Overpayments from interim disbursements

If prior to verification you make an interim disbursement of Pell or FSEOG funds, your school is liable for any overpayment that results. If you can't eliminate it by reducing subsequent disbursements or having the student return the money, your school must use its own funds to reimburse the appropriate program by the earlier of 60 days after the student's last day of attendance or the last day of the award year.

If prior to verification your school permits provisional FWS employment of students for up to 60 days, it is liable for any overpayment it can't recover by adjusting other aid, and it must reimburse the FWS account from its own funds. Students must be paid for all work performed out of your school's payroll account—they can't be required to repay FWS wages earned except when they are proven guilty of fraud.

Recovery of funds from interim disbursements

34 CFR 668.61

If you make an interim disbursement after completing verification but prior to receiving a correct valid SAR or ISIR, and you fail to receive the SAR or ISIR within the deadlines discussed later in this chapter, your school must use its own funds to reimburse the appropriate program and ensure that the student is paid under its own payroll account for all work performed.

Schools that can't make interim disbursements

Schools on the Heightened Cash Monitoring 2 (HCM2) and Reimbursement payment methods (see *Volume 4, Chapter 1*) must, as part of their request for Title IV funds from the Department, submit documentation showing that students were eligible to receive the funds disbursed to them (and for which the schools are seeking reimbursement). Because final determination of student eligibility includes completing verification, *HCM2 and reimbursement schools are not able to make interim disbursements.*

Updating Information

Generally, a student cannot update information that was correct as of the date the application was signed because the FAFSA form is a “snapshot” of the family's financial situation as of that date. For example, if the student's family sold some stock after the student signed the FAFSA form and spent the money on an unreported asset such as a car, he or she can't update their information to show a change in assets. After the FAFSA form is signed, only certain items can be updated under the following conditions:

1. **All applicants whose dependency status changes** must update that and the related FAFSA information throughout the award year except when the update is due to the student's marital status changing.
2. **All applicants selected by the Department or a school for verification of household size or number in college** must update those numbers to be correct as of the date of verification unless the update is due to a change in the student's marital status. Documenting household size or number in college is not required in a subsequent verification in the same year if the information has not changed.

Updating information

34 CFR 668.55

At your discretion you may update under either 1 or 2 even if the update is due to a change in the student's marital status

if you deem it necessary to address an inequity or to reflect more accurately the student's ability to pay. Such a decision must be on a case-by-case basis, and you must document your reasons for it. You must also update all other pertinent information, such as spousal income and taxes paid, to be consistent with the new marital status. Do this first if the student is selected for verification, and then complete verification of the updated application. If you change the student's status to unmarried and that makes him or her dependent (because he or she was independent only due to marriage), his or her FAFSA form must be updated with his or her parents' information. Your school may have a policy of not considering such updates after a specific census date.

Note, however, that you cannot update the marital status of an already independent student whose dependency status has not changed because of his or her marriage or divorce and who was not selected for verification. In such a case you must select the student for verification if you want to exercise your discretion to update their marital status and all other associated information.

Parent remarriage after applying

While the applicant does not typically update household size or number in college because of a change in his or her marital status, if the applicant is a dependent student and his or her parent remarries between application and verification, the student must update household size to include the new stepparent. However, the student would not count the new stepparent's income and assets. A school can use professional judgment to include the stepparent's income or to otherwise account for the change.

Correcting Errors

As explained in the last section, you only make updates in specified situations, but for students who are not selected for verification, you or they must correct and submit for processing any errors reported on the original FAFSA form that would change the EFC or the students' eligibility for Title IV aid.

For students who are selected for verification and receiving subsidized student aid, changes to any non-dollar item and to any dollar item of \$25 or more must be submitted for processing. See the section below on "changes in a selected applicant's FAFSA."

Changes in a Selected Applicant's FAFSA

To receive subsidized student aid, students or the school must submit for processing any changes resulting from verification to a non-dollar item or a single dollar item of \$25 or more. Also, if you are required to submit *any* change through CPS because of verification, you must submit *all* changes, including amounts that are below \$25.

Changes to FAFSA information

34 CFR 668.59 When there is an overaward from a regular disbursement, the following individual program regulations apply: Pell Grants: 34 CFR 690.79 FSEOG: 34 CFR 673.5(f) Subsidized Direct Loan: 34 CFR 685.303(g)

Pell changes

If FAFSA data change, recalculate the Pell Grant according to the EFC on the corrected valid SAR or ISIR. You can only pay an increased Pell Grant if you have that output document and it supports an increased Pell award.

If the Pell Grant is reduced and the student received an interim disbursement, adjust following disbursements as necessary. Failing that, the student should reimburse the Pell Grant Program, or, if he or she does not return the overpayment, your school must reimburse the Pell program with its funds. If the student received Pell Grant money as a regular disbursement, he or she is responsible for repaying the overpayment. See *Volume 4, Chapter 3* for information on overpayments.

Campus-Based and Direct Loan changes

When students receive subsidized student aid other than Pell Grants and there is a change, adjust the package based on the EFC on the corrected valid SAR or ISIR. If there was an interim disbursement, comply with the relevant rules if the package must be reduced. If there was a regular disbursement and the package must be reduced, comply with FSEOG overpayment rules or with the rules for dealing with excess loan proceeds for Direct Subsidized Loans.

Selection after disbursement

A student's application might be selected for verification after corrections are submitted and the student has been paid based on the previous unselected CPS transaction. You must verify his or her application before making further disbursements. If verification does not justify aid already disbursed, then the student is responsible for repaying all aid for which he or she is not eligible, though the student may keep any Direct Loan money he or she received and FWS wages earned. See the guidance described under the "Deadlines and Failure to Submit Documentation" section later in this chapter for what happens if the student fails to complete verification.

Example: Owen is attending Guerrero University. His application isn't selected for verification, and he receives aid in the fall. In December, Owen submits a correction on his SAR that causes the subsequent transaction to be selected for verification. The aid administrator at Guerrero tells Owen he needs to submit verification documents if he wants his aid for the spring and if he wants to keep the Pell funds he received for the fall. However, Owen doesn't submit the documents. Owen doesn't have to repay the Direct Loan he received in the fall, but he does have to return the Pell Grant, and Guerrero must cancel his aid package for the spring.

Disbursing unsubsidized aid

For students who are selected for Group V1 and are eligible for both subsidized and unsubsidized aid, a school may, on a case-by-case basis and with proper documentation, disburse Direct Unsubsidized and PLUS loans prior to completing verification that will be delayed. To avoid exceeding the student's financial need, the school must consider the subsidized aid he or she will receive and adjust the aid amounts after verification if necessary.

If the student never completes V1 verification, the Direct Unsubsidized and PLUS loan aid that was disbursed may be kept. If the institution determines that the student was ineligible when he or she received aid, see the relevant guidance on returning aid in such situations in *Volume 4, Chapter 3*.

After documentation is complete

When you've obtained all necessary verification documents from the student, you should compare them to the SAR or ISIR you are reviewing for payment. If all the student's information is correct or has been corrected and there are no outstanding issues or unresolved conflicting information, you may award and disburse aid for which the student is eligible.

Sometimes schools ask if even further verification is needed to resolve discrepancies between the ISIR and what the student provided for verification. The answer is no unless you have reason to doubt the accuracy of the verification information. Acceptable documentation either confirms that an item was right on the ISIR, or it is used to correct that item. That is the purpose of verification; continued fact-finding is not necessary.

How to Submit Corrections and Updates

Corrections and updates can be submitted by the student on the SAR or the web or by the school using FAA Access to CPS Online or the Electronic Data Exchange (EDE). In addition to the following information, see also "Corrections and Updates" in the [2023–2024 ISIR Guide](#).

Using the online FAFSA

Any student who has an FSA ID—regardless of how he or she originally applied—may correct any of his or her own data in the [online FAFSA](#). If dependent students need to change parental data, a parent must either sign electronically with his or her own FSA ID or print out and sign a signature page.

Submitting changes via FAA Access to CPS Online or EDE

Your school can submit corrections and updates electronically through [FAA Access to CPS Online](#) or EDEExpress even if the original application wasn't submitted with that method. If your school isn't listed on the transaction you want to correct, the student must provide you with the DRN printed on the SAR or SAR Acknowledgement. You can then add your school in the next available institution field and gain electronic access to the resulting corrected transaction. If all the fields are filled, the student must add your school code using *FAFSA on the Web*.

Corrections and updates sent by a school must be based on reliable documentation in its possession that supports the changes to applicant data or signed documentation from the student or parent of a dependent student. Examples of reliable documentation include applications for admission, acceptance letters, course registration information, or academic transcripts. Examples of signed documentation from a student or parent on which corrections and updates may be based include Part 2 of the SAR, a copy of the correction or update, student/parent statement, verification documents, or copies of tax returns or transcripts. Unlike those for the original application, these do not have to be wet signatures.

The CPS will process the change, send an ISIR to the school, and send the student a one-page SAR acknowledgement or, if the CPS has the student's email address, an email with a link to his or her SAR information on the web.

Using the SAR to make corrections

Students who received a paper SAR may make corrections or updates on it, then sign and return it to the FAFSA processor at the address given at the end of the SAR (of course, students with FSA IDs can instead use the online FAFSA). One parent must also sign if the student is dependent and parent data was changed, unless the only corrections are to the institution or housing codes, the address, or telephone number.

If the student applied electronically through a school or received an email link to SAR information on the web but would like to make corrections with a paper SAR, he or she can have one mailed to them by calling the FSAIC at 1-800-4-FED-AID and providing his or her name, SSN, and date of birth.

Adding schools and changing a student's address

As with other changes, a student can add schools or change his or her address, email address, or telephone number online or on a paper SAR. He or she can also update these items over the phone by calling 1-800-433-3243 and providing their DRN. You can submit those changes for the student through FAA Access to CPS Online if your school is listed on the student's application or you have the student's DRN.

The FAFSA form has limited space for a student to list schools that will receive the application data: four schools can be listed on the paper application; ten schools can be listed on the online FAFSA, FAA Access, or EDEExpress. If the student wants information sent to more schools, he or she can use any of the methods listed previously to replace some or all the original schools. If the student originally listed 10 schools on the application and then replaced two schools with two new ones, those that were replaced will not receive an ISIR from this correction or any subsequent correction on which they did not appear.

Signatures

Any required signatures, such as those on worksheets or on copies of tax returns, must be collected at the time of verification—they can't be collected after the verification deadline for that award year.

For verification documentation, a school may collect an electronic signature for an applicant, parent, or spouse if the process includes an assurance of the identity of the person signing. This is often accomplished with a PIN or password that is assigned only after the identity of the signer has been authenticated ([DOC-Q12 on the Q and A page](#)).

Deadlines and Failure to Submit Documentation

You must require students selected for verification—either by your school or the Department—to submit the documentation by the date specified by your school (for Campus-Based and Direct Loans) or the Department (for Pell).

Campus-Based and Direct Loans

If a student doesn’t provide verification documentation within your school’s established, reasonable timeframe, you cannot:

- disburse more FSEOG funds,
- employ or permit further FWS employment, or
- originate or disburse any additional Direct Loans (subsidized, unsubsidized, or PLUS).

The student must repay any FSEOG funds he or she received that year.

If the student fails to complete verification within your school’s established timeframe and if you received any Direct Subsidized Loan funds for the student that you did not disburse, you must return some or all of those funds under the excess cash tolerance regulation [see [34 CFR 668.166\(b\)](#) and *Volume 4, Chapter 1*].

Failure to submit documentation

34 CFR Pell Grants 668.60(c); 34 CFR Campus-Based/Direct Subsidized Loan 668.60(b)

If the student provides the required documentation after your school’s deadline, you may, at your discretion, provide aid if still within the Department’s overall verification deadlines.

Pell Grants

A student selected for verification may submit a valid SAR or a school can receive a valid ISIR after the Pell deadline but before the verification deadline published in the *Federal Register*. If a student does not provide the verification documentation or you do not receive the valid SAR or ISIR (if necessary) within this additional time, he or she forfeits their Pell Grant for the award year and must return any Pell money already received for that year.

Verification completed within additional time for Pell

34 CFR 668.60(c)(1)

Other considerations

The Department may determine not to process the FAFSA form of an applicant who has been requested to provide documentation until he or she does so or the Department decides there is no longer a need for it.

A Pell applicant selected for verification must complete the process by the deadline published in the *Federal Register*. The notice for the 2022-2023 award year was published on June 1, 2022, and corrected with a notice published on July 5, 2022. The deadline for the 2022-2023 award year is September 16, 2023, or 120 days after the last day of the student’s enrollment, whichever is earlier. When the notice for 2023-2024 is published, the corresponding deadline date is expected to be September 21, 2024. Campus-Based and Direct Loan applicants must complete verification by the same deadline or by an earlier one your aid office establishes.

Verification is complete when you have all the requested documentation and a valid ISIR or SAR (one on which all the information is accurate and complete). This includes any necessary corrections, which must be made by the *Federal Register* deadlines for submitting paper or electronic corrections.

Late disbursements

Generally, a student ceases to be eligible for aid once he or she has finished the payment period and/or is no longer enrolled. However, the student may submit verification documentation and receive a late disbursement after that time if the Department processed a SAR or ISIR with an official EFC while he or she was still enrolled. For information on post-withdrawal disbursements, see *Volume 5* and for more information on late disbursements, see *Volume 4*.

Verification status codes

When you disburse a Pell Grant, you must report the student's verification status through the Common Origination and Disbursement System (COD) even if he or she wasn't selected for verification.

V—You have verified the student. This includes students selected by the CPS and those your school chose to verify based on its own criteria.

W—The student was selected for verification by the CPS or your school, and you chose to pay a first disbursement of Pell without documentation (interim disbursement). **This code must be updated once verification is complete, or COD will reduce the Pell Grant to zero.**

S—The CPS selected the student for verification, but you did not verify the student because he or she satisfied one of the exclusions described earlier in the chapter (except the post-enrollment exclusion; see “Blank” next).

Blank—Report a blank if you have not performed verification for other reasons, i.e., because neither the CPS nor your school selected the student or because the student was selected by the CPS after ceasing to be enrolled at your school and all (including late) disbursements were made. A blank also applies when you disbursed aid on an initial transaction not selected for verification, a later transaction is selected, and the student never completes verification.

Suggested Verification Text

To review the suggested text for the 2023-2024 award year, see the attachment to [GEN-22-09](#). The suggested text fulfills verification requirements, but schools do not have to use it, except as noted below. Instead, they may develop and use their own (or someone else's) text, forms, documents, statements, and certifications that are specific to the items required to be verified for a particular student or group of students at the school. However, schools must not put the seal of the Department of Education on any verification documents.

The one exception is that schools must use the exact language provided in the “Statement of Educational Purpose” for students who are placed in verification tracking groups V4 or V5. This does not include the accompanying notary's certificate of acknowledgment; for that the school may use some other form, such as the one its state uses.

Chapter 5

Special Cases

There are unique situations where you will need to exercise your discretion as a financial aid administrator: when modifying data used to calculate the expected family contribution (EFC), performing dependency overrides, resolving conflicting information, reporting cases of fraud, and determining a student to be an unaccompanied homeless youth.

The following special cases are discussed in further detail in this chapter:

- You may choose to exercise professional judgment (PJ) to adjust a student's cost of attendance or the data that determine a student's EFC to account for a student's **special circumstance**.
 - You might decide that **unusual circumstances** warrant making a dependent student an independent student.
 - You may need to determine if a student should be classified as an **unaccompanied homeless youth**.
 - You may need to resolve a discrepancy after receiving conflicting information for a student.
 - In some cases, you may discover that a student or employee has been guilty of **fraud** and should be reported to the Department.
-

Professional Judgment

The *FAFSA Simplification Act* (the Act) distinguishes between different categories of professional judgment by amending section 479A of the HEA.

- **Special Circumstances** refer to the financial situations (loss of a job, etc.) that justify an aid administrator adjusting data elements in the COA or in the EFC calculation.
- **Unusual Circumstances** refer to the conditions that justify an aid administrator making an adjustment to a student's dependency status based on a unique situation (e.g., human trafficking, refugee or asylee status, parental abuse or abandonment, incarceration), more commonly referred to as a dependency override.

A student may have both a special circumstance and an unusual circumstance. Financial aid administrators (FAAs) may make adjustments that are appropriate to each student's situation with appropriate documentation. See [GEN-22-15](#) for additional guidance and discussion of the changes made by the *FAFSA Simplification Act* and implemented for the 2023-24 Award Year.

Special Circumstances

An aid administrator may use PJ on a case-by-case basis to adjust the student's cost of attendance or the data used to calculate his or her EFC. This adjustment is valid only at the school making the change.

The law gives some examples of special circumstances that MAY be considered (HEA Sec. 479A):

- Change in employment status, income, or assets
- Change in housing status (e.g., homelessness)
- Tuition expenses at an elementary or secondary school
- Medical, dental, or nursing home expenses not covered by insurance
- Child or dependent care expenses
- Severe disability of the student or other member of the student's household
- Other changes or adjustments that impact the student's costs or ability to pay for college.

This is not an exhaustive list. You may use your discretion to make appropriate, reasonable adjustments to reflect a student's situation more accurately. As explained in Chapter 2, this may include accounting for resources, such as in-kind support, that do not appear on the FAFSA or in the EFC calculation. You may also use your discretion to deny a student's request for adjustment. However, you may not maintain a policy to deny all requests for special circumstance adjustments. This means that schools can no longer indicate that they do not perform PJs. Your institution must develop policies and a process for reviewing requests for professional judgment. Additionally, your institution must publicly disclose that students may request an adjustment based on special circumstances. This could include (but is not limited

to) posting what may be considered a special or unusual circumstance on your website, include such information in mailings to students, or add language on award notifications.

The reason for your decision to approve or deny a request for professional judgment and any subsequent adjustments **must be documented**. The documentation must relate to the special circumstances that differentiate the student—not to conditions that exist for a whole class of students. You must resolve any inconsistent or conflicting information before making any adjustments. An FAA’s decision regarding adjustments is final and cannot be appealed to the Department.

The law *doesn’t allow you to modify either the formula or the tables used in the EFC calculation*; you can only change the cost of attendance, or the values of specific data elements used in the EFC calculation. In addition, you cannot adjust data elements or the cost of attendance solely because you believe the tables and formula are not adequate or appropriate. The data elements that are adjusted must relate to the student’s special circumstances. For example, if a family member is ill, you might modify the AGI to allow for lower earnings in the coming year or might adjust assets to indicate that family savings will be spent on medical expenses.

You also cannot use PJ to waive general student eligibility requirements or to circumvent the intent of the law or regulations. For instance, you cannot use PJ to change FSEOG selection criteria.

Occasionally aid administrators have made decisions contrary to the professional judgment provision’s intent. These “unreasonable” judgments have included, for example, the reduction of EFCs based on recurring costs such as vacation expenses, tithing expenses, and standard living expenses (e.g. utilities, credit card expenses, children’s allowances, etc.). Aid administrators must make “reasonable” decisions that support the intent of the provision. Your school is held accountable for all professional judgment decisions and for fully documenting each decision.

When considering using PJ, an FAA should keep in mind that an income protection allowance (IPA) is included in the EFC calculation to account for modest living expenses. Before adjusting for an unusual expense, consider whether it is already covered by the IPA. It is reasonable to assume that approximately 30% of the IPA is for food, 22% for housing, 9% for transportation expenses, 16% for clothing and personal care, 11% for medical care, and 12% for other family consumption. The income protection allowance is one of the intermediate values in the FAA Information section of the output document (labeled as “IPA”). See *Chapter 3* for the IPA values and how they impact the student’s EFC calculation.

If you use professional judgment to adjust a data element, you must use the resulting EFC consistently for all FSA funds awarded to that student. For example, if for awarding the student’s Pell Grant you adjust a data element that affects the EFC, that new EFC must also be used to determine the student’s eligibility for aid from the Campus-Based and Direct Loan programs.

If you make a PJ adjustment, you must set the FAA Adjustment flag. You submit a PJ change electronically, via FAA Access to CPS Online or third-party software, and may do so without a signature from the student or parent. In FAA Access or Electronic Data Exchange (EDE), you must select “EFC adjustment requested” for the professional judgment field. The next ISIR will indicate “Professional judgment processed.”

If you exercise PJ for a student who was selected for verification (by you or the Department), you must complete verification first. This is to ensure that you have correct information before considering a PJ adjustment. You may, however, complete verification and then make the PJ adjustment on the same transaction.

You do not have to verify information that you will entirely remove due to PJ. For example, if a dependent student’s parents have separated after completion of the FAFSA form and one parent is no longer in the household size, you may decide to use PJ to remove that parent’s income from the FAFSA form. You do not have to verify that parent’s income prior to removing it. **Also, using PJ does not require you to verify a student’s application if he or she was not already selected for verification by the Department or your school.**

Finally, a school is not permitted to make a professional judgement for a student after that student has ceased to be eligible, including when a student is no longer enrolled.

The [verification page on the FSA Assessments site](#) has guidance to help you review your PJ and dependency override procedures; see Activity 2.

Example 1: Kitty’s mother had income earned from work of \$25,000 in 2021 but is no longer employed. After receiving documentation confirming this, the FAA at Krieger College decides to adjust the AGI reported for Kitty’s parents to account for their reduced income. The FAA also reduces the income earned from work for Kitty’s mother to zero.

Example 2: In 2021 Alan had \$4,500 in medical expenses that were out-of-pocket costs. He is married, has two children, and is the only member of his household in college, so his IPA is \$46,040. Because his expenses were less than the amount for medical expenses already provided for in the IPA (11% of \$46,040 is \$5,067), the aid administrator at Sarven Technical Institute does not adjust Alan’s FAFSA form.

Professional Judgment During a Disaster, Emergency, or Economic Downturn

The *FAFSA Simplification Act*, enacted into law as part of the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021*, and amended by the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022*, codifies previous guidance from the Department (as issued in earlier Dear Colleague Letters) to use statutory authority to exercise professional judgment during a disaster, emergency, or economic downturn.

Financial aid administrators may, during a qualifying emergency:

- determine that the income earned from work for an applicant is zero, if the applicant can provide paper or electronic documentation of receipt of unemployment benefits or confirmation that an application for unemployment benefits was submitted; and
- make additional appropriate adjustments to the income earned from work for a student, parent, or spouse, as applicable, based on the totality of the family's situation, including consideration of unemployment benefits.

Acceptable documentation of unemployment should be submitted not more than 90 days from the date it was issued. However, institutions may use discretion to accept documentation older than 90 days under their general professional judgment authority if they do not have reason to believe there is conflicting information.

Further, the Department will adjust the program review selection model to account for an increase in the use of professional judgment by schools during the award years applicable to the qualifying emergency.

Refusing or reducing a loan

FAAs may also use their discretion to refuse or reduce Direct Loan funds if they document the reason, make the determination on a case-by-case basis, notify the student in writing, and ensure the decision is not due to discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, religion, sex, income, age, or disability.

Refusing or reducing a loan

34 CFR 685.301(a)(8)

Unusual Circumstances

The *FAFSA Simplification Act* provides a clearer directive for FAAs to assist applicants with unusual circumstances to adjust dependency status on the FAFSA form to reflect students’ situations more accurately (dependency overrides). Like other types of professional judgments, institutions must make students aware of their ability to request an adjustment for unusual circumstances by publicly posting the option on their website.

An FAA may conduct dependency overrides on a **case-by-case** basis for students with unusual circumstances. If the FAA

determines that an override is appropriate, he or she must maintain the determination with any supporting documentation.

Dependency overrides

HEA Sec. 479A(c) and 480(d)(9)). Also see Dear Colleague Letter [GEN-22-15](#).

Under HEA Sec. 480(d)(9), the *FAFSA Simplification Act* incorporated additional unusual circumstances to consider when a student is unable to contact a parent or where contact with parents poses a risk to such student.

Unusual circumstances do include:

- Human trafficking, as described in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (22 U.S.C. 7101 et seq.);
- Legally granted refugee or asylum status;
- Parental abandonment or estrangement; or
- Student or parental incarceration.

In such cases an override might be warranted based upon the student's individual circumstances. These conditions would also not disqualify a student from being a homeless unaccompanied youth or self-supporting and at risk of homelessness.

However, none of the conditions listed below, singly or in combination, qualify as unusual circumstances meriting a dependency override.

Unusual circumstances do not include:

- Parents refuse to contribute to the student's education.
- Parents will not provide information for the FAFSA or verification.
- Parents do not claim the student as a dependent for income tax purposes.
- Student demonstrates total self-sufficiency.

An aid administrator may override only from dependent to independent (though as suggested earlier, if an independent student receives substantial support from others, a school may use PJ to adjust the COA or FAFSA data items, such as untaxed income).

Additionally, the Act introduces new requirements for processing and communicating with students who request an adjustment for unusual circumstances. For aid applications for the 2023-24 Award Year and thereafter, schools and financial aid administrators must:

- Notify students of the school's process, requirements, and reasonable timeline to review adjustment requests after their FAFSA form is submitted;
- Provide students with a final determination of their dependency status and financial aid award as soon as practicable after reviewing all requested documentation;
- Retain all documentation, including documented interviews, related to the adjustment for at least 3 years after the student's last term of enrollment; and
- Presume that any student who has obtained an adjustment for unusual circumstances and a final determination of independence to be independent for each subsequent award year at the same institution unless--
 - The student informs the institution that their circumstances have changed; or
 - The institution has conflicting information about the student's independence.

Documentation is critical – schools must ensure that any supporting documentation they collect is adequate to substantiate the student's circumstances. Documentation may include (but is not limited to) the following:

- a documented interview between the student and the financial aid administrator;

- submission of a court order or official Federal or State documentation that the student or student’s parents or legal guardians are incarcerated;
- a documented phone call or written statement, which confirms the unusual circumstances with:
 - a state, county or Tribal welfare agency;
 - an independent living case worker who supports current and former foster youth with the transition to adulthood;
 - a public or private agency, facility, or program servicing the victims of abuse, neglect, assault, or violence; or
- a documented phone call or written statement from an attorney, guardian ad litem, a court-appointed special advocate (or similar), or a representative of a TRIO or GEAR UP program which confirms the circumstances and the person’s relationship to the student;
- a documented determination of independence made by a financial aid administrator at another institution in the same or a prior award year; or
- utility bills, health insurance, or other documents that demonstrate a separation from parents or legal guardians.

Beginning with the 2023-2024 award year, FAAs may use a dependency override made in a prior award year at the same institution. In fact, the Department encourages you to use the flexibility in the law to presume a student with a dependency override is independent in subsequent years unless the student tells you their situation has changed, or you have conflicting information. Though institutions can ask students if their unusual circumstances or homeless situation has changed each year, they should not maintain a practice that delays or hinders financial aid for such a student, nor may they require the student to answer prior to packaging or disbursing aid or require the student to submit additional documentation unless there is conflicting information that the institution needs to resolve.

To override the student’s dependent status on an initial application through FAA Access to CPS Online, the FAA should use the Dependency Override code of “1” (see the *EDE Technical Reference* for more information).

To authorize a dependency override on a paper FAFSA form, the FAA marks the bubble for an override, labeled “D/O,” in the “College Use Only” area, fills in the school’s federal code, and signs. A separate letter attached to the application in lieu of making the override is **not** acceptable.

Overrides on the paper FAFSA

COLLEGE USE ONLY

D/O ☒ 1

Homeless Youth Determination ☐ 4

FEDERAL SCHOOL CODE

FAA Signature

1

If the student has already applied, you can use FAA Access to authorize or cancel an override; overrides cannot be done on the SAR. If he or she had an override done at another school in the current year, that will be noted with the school’s federal code on FAA Access. Only the school performing the override will receive that transaction. If the student adds your school to the transaction or if he or she gives you his or her data release number (DRN), you can access the record.

Override examples

Example 1: Said is a refugee from Syria who qualifies for federal student aid as an eligible noncitizen. But his FAFSA form was rejected because he is a dependent student and did not provide data for his parents. When the aid administrator asks him for his parents’ information, he says they are in Syria and have been displaced due to the upheaval there, and he doesn’t know how to contact them. The FAA asks him for documentation of this and Said says that he has an uncle living in the U.S. who can attest to his situation. The FAA asks for Said’s uncle to either appear in person and sign a statement confirming Said’s account or to send the aid office a notarized statement. Said’s uncle, who works not far from the school, comes to the aid office, signs the statement, and the FAA grants Said a dependency override.

Example 2: Sam is a lesbian who came out to her parents when she was 14. Her relationship with them, which was not very good before, became so much worse that they told her she needed to move out. Sam reached out to her high school counselor for help, who asked her if she had some place to go. The parents of Sam's good friend Josie said that she could stay with them. Because they provided her fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, she would not be considered a homeless youth.

Sam's relationship with her parents did not improve, and over the next several years she had almost no contact with them. When Sam filled out her FAFSA for the first time, she entered the names of Josie's parents without telling them or including their SSNs or birthdates. When the application was rejected, Sam spoke to an FAA at the college she planned to attend, who explained to her that she would need to include the information for her legal parents. Sam told the FAA about her situation, and the FAA asked her to provide documentation. Sam provided a statement regarding her situation and a letter from Josie's family. Her high school counselor also provided a statement with his knowledge of the situation. After reviewing the documentation provided, the FAA granted a dependency override.

Unable to provide parent data

Students can indicate in the online FAFSA that they believe they have unusual circumstances that prevent them from providing parental data. Those who indicate this are thoroughly informed about what warrants a dependency override and what the results will be for their application. If they persist through those screens and do not include parental data, they will get a rejected ISIR with the special circumstances flag set. You will have to review such a student's situation and determine if he or she:

1. is unaccompanied and homeless,
2. merits a dependency override,
3. must instead provide parental data, or
4. should be permitted to borrow only unsubsidized loans because he or she can document that his or her parents have refused to support him or her and to provide their information on his or her FAFSA.

Dependent students without parent support

Dependent students whose parents refuse to support them are not eligible for a dependency override, but they may be able to receive a dependent level Direct Unsubsidized Loan only. For a student to be eligible for this provision you must document the following:

1. the student's parents refuse to complete the FAFSA; or
2. the student's parents do not and will not provide any financial support to him or her (include the date support ended).

If the parents refuse to sign and date a statement to this effect, you must get documentation from a third party (the student is not sufficient), such as a teacher, counselor, cleric, or court.

This situation does not on its own justify a dependency override. However, resolving the situation is at your discretion. If you decide that a student falls into this category, you must document your decision and ensure that the student submits a FAFSA form and passes all the eligibility matches. The result will be a rejected application with no EFC. You can then award the student a Direct Unsubsidized Loan up to the maximum the student would normally be eligible for depending on his or her grade level (but not the amount a student can get when his or her parent is unable to get a Direct PLUS Loan).

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

If a student does not have and cannot get documentation from any of the authorities listed under the "Unaccompanied homeless youth" section in Chapter 2, you (the FAA) must determine if he or she is an unaccompanied youth who is

homeless or is self-supporting and at risk of being homeless. Any student who is not yet 24 may qualify for a homeless youth determination. It is important to make homeless youth determinations on a case-by-case basis.

Homeless youth determinations

A student is considered homeless if he or she lacks fixed, regular, and adequate housing. This is broader than just living “on the street.” It includes but is not limited to:

- youth sharing housing with other people temporarily because they had nowhere else to go;
- youth living in emergency or transitional shelters, for example, trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency after disasters;
- youth living in motels, campgrounds, cars, parks, abandoned buildings, bus or train stations, substandard housing, or any public or private place not designed for humans to live in;
- youth living in the school dormitory if they would otherwise be homeless; and
- youth who are migrants and who qualify as experiencing homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.

The documentation for an FAA’s evaluation of the living arrangements of a student must demonstrate that he or she meets the definition of this category of independent student. The determination may be based upon a written statement from, or a documented interview with, the student that confirms that they are an unaccompanied homeless youth, or unaccompanied, at risk of homelessness, and self-supporting. Such determination should be made without regard to the reasons that the student is unaccompanied and/or homeless.

Remember the following when you are making a homelessness determination:

- Ask for help with determining eligibility from local school district homeless liaisons, state homeless education coordinators, the National Center for Homeless Education (<https://nche.ed.gov/higher-education/>), or the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (<https://naehcy.org/higher-education/>). Search for “Making Student Status Determinations for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth” to find worksheets and tools to help make your determination.
- Relevant information can come from recognized third parties such as private or publicly funded homeless shelters and service providers, financial aid administrators from another college, college access programs such as TRIO and GEAR UP, college or high school counselors, other mental health professionals, social workers, mentors, doctors, and clergy.
- Use discretion when gathering information and respect the student’s privacy. Some information, such as that protected by doctor-patient privilege, is confidential. Also, documents such as police or Child Protective Services reports are not necessary. *Don’t focus on why the student is homeless or unaccompanied but on whether the evidence shows he or she is an unaccompanied homeless youth.*
- Determine eligibility based on the legal definitions provided (see “Homeless youth definitions” below).
- Recall that unaccompanied homeless youth may use the address of your school as their own on the FAFSA form.

For students you determine to be unaccompanied homeless youths or unaccompanied, self-supporting youths at risk of being homeless, select the homeless youth determination option (#4) in the dependency override field in FAA Access to CPS Online or EDE. On the paper FAFSA, fill in the relevant bubble in the “College Use Only” box (see the graphic under the “Dependency Overrides” section in this chapter), include your school code, and sign. To cancel a homeless youth determination, you use the same method as when canceling a dependency override: change the dependency override value to “2—FAA override canceled” in FAA Access or EDE.

Finally, if you do not have conflicting information at your institution, you **must** use documentation from an FAA at another institution that made a documented determination that a student was an unaccompanied homeless youth in the same or prior award year. You should also presume that a student for whom your institution has made a determination of homelessness continues to be independent in each subsequent year at your institution unless the student tells you their circumstances have changed, or you have conflicting information.

At risk of being homeless—when a student’s housing may cease to be fixed, regular, and adequate, for example, a student who is being evicted and has been unable to find fixed, regular, and adequate housing

Homeless—lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing

Self-supporting—when a student pays for his or her own living expenses, including fixed, regular, and adequate housing

Unaccompanied—when a student is not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian

Housing

Fixed—stationary, permanent, and not subject to change

Regular—used on a predictable, routine, or consistent basis

Adequate—sufficient for meeting both the physical and psychological needs typically met in the home

Timing of Determinations of Independence

The *FAFSA Simplification Act* provides additional guidance on the timing of determinations of independence for certain student populations (HEA 479D(c)). These include unaccompanied homeless youth or at-risk homeless youth, foster care youth, orphans, wards of the court, and students with unusual circumstances.

Institutions must review all requests for a determination of independence as quickly as practicable, but no later than 60 days after the student enrolls.

Note that the timeframe in the law is intended to encourage FAAs to make determinations as quickly as practicable. It is not intended to inhibit FAAs from making such a determination when a student requests one later in an award year. We encourage you to act on a request for a determination of independence within 60 days of the student making such a request. Further, you may deny such requests if a student does not provide requested documentation within the 60-day timeframe.

Conflicting Information

In addition to reviewing application and data match information from the CPS, a school must have an adequate internal system to identify conflicting information—regardless of the source and regardless of whether the student is selected for verification—that would affect a student’s eligibility, such as information from the admissions office as to whether the student has a high school diploma or information from other offices regarding academic progress and enrollment status. The school must resolve all such conflicting information, except when the student dies during the award year or when he or she is no longer enrolled and will not re-enroll; if the student later enrolls, you are again obligated to resolve the conflicting information.

Requirement to identify and resolve discrepant information

34 CFR 668.16(f)

If your school has conflicting information concerning a student’s eligibility or you have any reason to believe his or her application information is incorrect, you must resolve the discrepancies before disbursing FSA funds and, as with verification, before making any PJ adjustment. If you discover discrepancies after disbursing FSA funds, you must still reconcile the conflicting information and take appropriate action under the specific program requirements (depending on the outcome, funds may have to be returned).

Requirement to verify questionable data

34 CFR 668.54(a)(2) “If an institution has reason to believe that an applicant’s FAFSA information is inaccurate, it must verify the accuracy of that information.”

Subsequent ISIRs

You are generally required to review all subsequent transactions for a student for the entire processing year even if you verified an earlier transaction. An exception to this requirement is if a later transaction comes in after the student is no longer enrolled at your institution. Review the EFC or C flag for changes. Review new comments or NSLDS information that impacts eligibility for aid. Check any updates or corrections or whether the verification tracking group has changed. If the EFC has not changed and there are no changes in the C flag, tracking group, or NSLDS information, no action is generally required. If the EFC does change but it either doesn’t affect the amount and type of aid received or the data elements that changed were already verified, no action is required. But if the EFC changes and the pertinent data elements were not verified, then you must investigate. Of course, any time the C flag changes or NSLDS data have been modified, you must resolve any conflicts.

Discrepant tax data

Financial aid administrators do not need to be tax experts, yet there are some issues that even a layperson with basic tax law information can evaluate. Because conflicting data often involve such information, FAAs must have a fundamental understanding of relevant tax issues that can impact the need analysis. You are obligated to know (1) whether a person was required to file a tax return and (2) what the correct filing status for a person should be. The IRS’s online [Interactive Tax Assistant](#) can help with these and other issues by walking the user through a series of questions. [IRS Publication 17](#) is also a useful resource.

For example, an FAA who notices that a dependent student’s parents, who are married and live together, have each filed as head of household (which offers a greater tax deduction than filing as single or married) must ask if that is the right status. Resolution of the conflict could be the parents refiling and submitting a copy of the amended return or a reasonable explanation of why there really is no conflict under IRS rules.

Marital and tax filing status

The ISIR/SAR comment codes 361–368 indicate a possible error when the filing status and marital status do not match. This is not considered to be conflicting information subject to the resolution requirements of 34 CFR 668.16(f), but we do encourage schools to review the application for mistakes when these comments appear. Note that the FAFSA’s use of prior-prior year tax data can increase the number of these comment codes. See the [2023-24 SAR Comment Codes and Text Guide](#) for more information.

Resolution of conflicting information

You may not disburse aid until you have resolved conflicting information, which you must do for any student as long as he or she is at your school. *Even if the conflict concerns a previous award year, you must still investigate it.* You have resolved the matter when you have determined which data are correct; this might simply be confirming that an earlier determination was the right one. You must document your findings and include an explanation that justifies your decision.

The [verification page on the FSA Assessments site](#) has guidance to help you review your conflicting information procedures; see Activity 1.

Referral of Fraud Cases

If you suspect that a student, employee, or other individual has misreported information or altered documentation to

fraudulently obtain federal funds, you must report your suspicions and provide any evidence to the Office of Inspector General (OIG). See also *Volume 2*.

OIG Address and Phone Numbers

National Hotline

Inspector General’s Hotline Office of Inspector General U.S. Department of Education 400 Maryland Avenue, SW Washington, DC 20202-1500

Fax: (202) 245-7047

1-800-MIS-USED (1-800-647-8733) Hours: M, W 9–11 a.m. T, Th 1–3 p.m.

To submit a complaint online at any time, go to <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oig/hotline.html> and click on the appropriate link.

Regional Offices	Telephone No.
Boston, MA	617-289-0174
New York, NY	646-428-3861
Philadelphia, PA	215-656-6900
Pittsburgh, PA	412-395-4528
Atlanta, GA	404-974-9430
Pembroke Pines, FL	954-450-7346
Chicago, IL	312-730-1630
Dallas, TX	214-661-9530
Ann Arbor, MI	734-330-2059
Denver, CO	303-844-0058
Nashville, TN	615-736-2205
Kansas City, MO	816-268-0500
Long Beach, CA	562-980-4141
Phoenix, AZ	602-507-6180

OIG referrals

34 CFR 668.16(g)

Reporting Fraud Rings (Distance Education)

Institutions should submit fraud ring complaints through the Department's OIG encrypted complaint web portal at the URL address <https://oighotlineportal.ed.gov>. Because the portal is encrypted, institutions do not need to encrypt submitted documents.

In addition, institutions will submit a Fraud Ring Reporting Spreadsheet through the IG's compliant process. For more information on how to report fraud rings or for a copy of the Fraud Ring Reporting Spreadsheet, please review the [August 21, 2020 electronic announcement](#).

FSA Feedback Center

Through the [FSA Feedback Center](#), students, parents, and others can submit to the Department the following feedback:

- compliments about a positive experience they have had with the Department, a school, or a federal loan servicer;
- allegations of suspicious activity by a school or person that might have violated federal laws regarding federal student aid; or
- complaints about
 - applying for and receiving federal loans, grants, and work study;
 - experiences with federal loan servicers, collection agencies, or the Department; and
 - schools—their administration of the FSA programs, marketing and recruitment practices, or misrepresentations of facts.